



R.L. 1850
JAMES

BAY

It was here, in the huge, unsettled country lying between the Red River and the Big Lake, that I became embroiled in the desperate struggle of the fur traders. I shall never forget those exciting months on the dangerous trails of the voyageurs. As I look back on them, I wonder how I ever came through alive.

Ronald Macmillan

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BUCKSKIN COLONIST



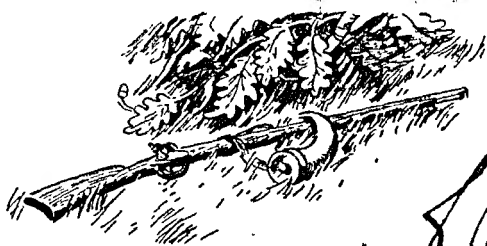
*I don't think I ever hit a man so hard
in all my life.*

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Buckskin Colonist

By JOHN F. HAYES

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Chapter One

RED STANDS FOR DANGER

WE HAD just finished a delicious supper of smoked fish which Mother had cooked on the spit in front of the broad, stone fireplace of our cabin in the North. Father and I had come outside to watch a heavily-laden freight canoe pass down the Red River.

It was piled high with fur bales, and rode low in the water. At the thought of furs, Kat's warning flashed through my mind. More than once he had told me in his funny, broken English, "Traders no like you here. You get plenty trouble yet. You better watch out."

Father and I often used to rest a bit like this after our evening meal, and whenever I saw one of these big, birch-bark craft I would picture how I, too, should some day follow the dangerous trails of the voyageurs. Down this broad Canadian stream I would go in my

mind's eye, north to Lake Winnipeg and beyond, across to the Hayes River and down its turbulent waters to the very fringe of the Arctic itself, where I would land my imaginary load of precious furs at the Hudson's Bay Company post of York Factory.

Our cabin was the southernmost of the Selkirk Settlement, named after the Earl of Selkirk who had brought us out to this great new land. It stood on a knoll, well back from the bank, and I was quite sure it was the sturdiest house in the whole colony.

It was large—about twenty-five feet long and easily eighteen feet wide. The walls were of good stout logs, and the slanting roof was securely thatched with tough sod and prairie grass. Father had cut two windows in the sides, and had made snug shutters which fitted into grooves to cover the openings in bad weather.

We built a big, stone fireplace at the left of the door, and at the back of the room high partitions of smooth, peeled poles fenced off our sleeping quarters. Our bunks were roomy and comfortable, and the first thing Mother did after breakfast every morning was to make them up neatly with the brilliantly red Hudson's Bay blankets we had been issued at York Factory.

Our table, chairs, and cupboard were all made from split logs, and Father had done a wonderful job of furniture-making, considering the few tools he had. He even made wooden hinges for the door, and they worked perfectly.

Our nearest neighbours were the Colbys, who lived in their own little cabin on the plot of ground next to

us. They were nice people, and we visited back and forth a lot. You see, visiting was one of the few pleasures we had in the Settlement, and I always enjoyed curling up in the corner and listening to the older folks talk in front of the cheery fire.

Before long I learned that Mr. Colby's sister, Mrs. Fraser, had come out to Canada with her husband and daughter three or four years before ourselves. They lived at Fort William, a great North-West Company post on Lake Superior, hundreds of miles eastward from our colony, and their daughter, Annette, had been ten years old when Robert Fraser left Scotland.

"She'd be just about your age now, Ronald," Mrs. Colby often said to me fondly.

The Colbys had no children of their own, but they talked so much about Annette that it seemed she was part of their family. In fact, it wasn't long before I began to think of her as a neighbour, even though I'd never seen her.

"It's too bad," Mrs. Colby said one night as our two families sat and talked, "that Robert and his wife and child aren't here in the Settlement with their kin, instead of being away down at Fort William among the fur traders."

"I've been thinking about that a good deal myself," Father answered. "Suppose we send word to Robert Fraser with the first brigade to the Big Lakes, and ask him and his family to join us."

I soon forgot about Father's notion, but I had plenty of reason to remember it later on.

Our colony was only a short distance from the spot where the Assiniboine River flowed from the west into the Red, and Father told me that the Red started hundreds of miles even farther south, following its twisting course clear across Assiniboia, past our cabin, and north to Lake Winnipeg.

I still wasn't accustomed to the immense distances of this huge, unsettled country, and I secretly decided that some day I would see for myself if the tales the swarthy voyageurs told were true or not. I never missed a chance of listening to these care-free, buckskin-clad men who roamed the wilderness, and their stories always set my blood tingling.

A couple of Hudson's Bay men, Scots like ourselves, used to drop into our cabin to see Father once in a while, and I was all ears when they started spinning yarns around the fireplace in the evening.

They told of great herds of buffalo, so large that the animals covered the prairies as far as you could see. They talked about the country to the north of us where the jumping deer were as thick as the rabbits around the Settlement, and where countless rivers and lakes wove a crazy pattern through the thick forest. They told of a range of towering mountains, many weeks' travel to the west, where giant grizzly bears and nimble mountain goats lived on the tree-clad slopes and high up among the crags.

But sooner or later their talk would always swing to furs, and they would complain bitterly about the Nor'Westers who had set up trading posts all through

the fur country, and who paid no attention whatever to the Royal Charter of King Charles II, which gave the Hudson's Bay Company the sole right to the rich fur trade of this part of North America.

Then they would tell of their fights with the Nor' Westers, and how they had outwitted their rivals. I recall asking one of these Hudson's Bay men if he thought we would ever get mixed up in the quarrel, and he said, "Ronnie, lad, this feud between the Nor' Westers and us canna lead to anything but open fighting. I hope you folks here on the Red dinna get into it, but you likely will, because Selkirk's backin' ye up, an' Selkirk's a Hudson's Bay man."

As I sat now on a big firewood log and gazed out over the Red's muddy waters where the canoe was disappearing around a bend down river, I thought how nice it would be if only there were no trouble in this new land, so that we could go about making our living without worrying about the Nor' Westers, who looked on us as Hudson's Bay people, and therefore as enemies.

I was still sitting there when Kat came riding out towards me from the bush, astride a wiry little Indian pony and leading another by a buckskin thong around its neck. I'd been looking forward all day to a gallop with him this grand evening. I jumped to my feet when I saw him coming.

Father glanced quickly at the two ponies, then at me, and said, "And will you be riding again, Ronnie?"

I nodded. "I'd like to, Father." I could tell from his look that something worried him.

"Is there anything the matter?" I added.

We were walking slowly towards the spot where Kat held the horses, and Father's long, easy tread was soundless on the freshly turned earth. He looked to the south where the stockades of Fort Gibraltar could be seen in the distance, behind the clusters of trees and clumps of brush which dotted the fertile land near the river bank.

I had an idea what was going through his mind, for the Nor'West traders, who owned the fort down at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine, were growing more and more unfriendly towards everybody in our colony. The last little while none of us had ventured very far over the prairies alone. Finally Father spoke:

"You're takin' to this new country in fine style, Ronnie, but be careful of the folks from yon fort. The Nor'Westers have turned the half-breeds against us, that you know, and I want no harm to befall you at their hands."

He turned to me and smiled quietly, but his eyes were still serious. I knew pretty well then that the hostility between the fur traders and our settlers must have reached a point where it was a lot worse than just unfriendliness. Still, I really did want to go riding with Kat tonight, so I said, "I'll be careful, Father."

The words were no sooner out of my mouth than my brother, Wallace, appeared in the doorway of our home. When he saw me putting Kat's bridle on one of the ponies, he frowned and strode over beside Father, and stood there with his big hands propped on his hips.

"Ronnie Macmillan," he disapproved, "you'll get yourself in trouble yet racing all over the prairies, the way things are. You'd be doing better helping me finish the hoeing tonight."

He gazed at me in that superior way elder brothers sometimes do to their younger kin, but I couldn't help grinning at him as he stood beside Father, for the two were so much alike. They had the same thick shock of black hair; the same clear, blue eyes; the same way of standing, with one shoulder a little higher than the other; and Wallie's whiskers, for an eighteen-year-old, were already on their way to being a good match for Father's bushy, black beard.

Kat looped the thong of rawhide around his pony's lower jaw, for that was all he needed to guide his mount. There was only one bridle between us, and he let me use it. He grunted as he turned to Father and Wallie.

"Small Macmillan all right with me. Me watch."

Kat's English was passable, but his voice was as expressionless as his stolid face. Father smiled at the young Indian and said, "I know, Kat. You good boy. You both good boys."

Kat came as close to grinning as I have ever seen him, as Father said to my brother, "Ronnie has been hoeing in the hot sun all day, Wallie, while you were after fish on the river. I think it's all right for him to go." He swung to Kat and me as we waited astride our spotted ponies. "Off with you, then, Ronnie! But be back before dark, or your mother will be worrying. Have a good gallop, lads!"

Kat and I wheeled our ponies and raced down towards the Red River, where a good trail led southward to a favourite spot of ours—a deep, narrow gully, or coulee, as the folks around here call them. Behind us and to the north-west the newly built cabins of the Selkirk Settlers strung away over the prairies, the smoke from their stone chimneys making little columns of grey stain on the blue sky. Up river from us we could see Fort Gibraltar, where, I well knew from what rumours I had heard, our presence on the Red River was deeply resented, especially by the fur traders of the Nor'West Company.

Like any boy my age, I wasn't particularly concerned with rumours, although I had wondered a bit when Father told us that our arrival last fall had alarmed the Nor'Westers, and bothered some of the Hudson's Bay traders as well. Just a day or two ago I had heard him say that we were being spoken of more and more as interlopers who would sooner or later be driven off the Red River by fair means or foul.

But there was no thought of any immediate danger in my mind as Kat and I now headed south, beyond the neck of land where the river makes a sudden curve back on itself to create Point Douglas. We galloped on through the tousie scrub, and over the intervening clear spots towards our coulee hideaway.

Somehow a feeling of gloom had settled over my spirits, and I had a strange urge to swing around then and there and go back to help Wallie with his hoeing. I wasn't quite enjoying this ride as I thought I would.

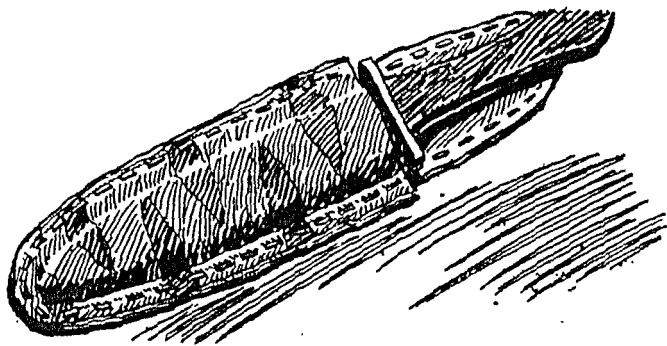
Maybe it was the sight of that fur-laden canoe which disturbed me, for the words of the Hudson's Bay man pounded through my head repeatedly:—"Open fighting . . . open fighting. . . open fighting . . ."

I tried to shake off my uneasiness, but Father's caution popped up in my mind again and again. It wasn't like him to worry about things, but I knew he was worrying now. Finally I turned to Kat, who galloped up beside me.

"Kat," I demanded hurriedly, "do you think the Nor'Westers will attack us?"

The young Indian looked straight ahead as he answered.

"Traders no like you here," he muttered. "You get plenty trouble yet. You better watch out."



Chapter Two

PERIL ON THE COULEE BOTTOM

WE RODE on together, Kat and I, the warm wind in our faces. The smell of the fresh, growing grass somehow lent a queer enchantment to the evening. I buried my hand in the thick mane of my pony. He laid his ears back and snorted, and I grinned to myself as he flicked himself sideways like a playful puppy. A startled bird rose out of the tangle of grass, crying shrilly in annoyance at being disturbed. Little, dark animals called gophers ducked into the protection of their holes in the earth as we raced past them. We had no saddles, and the warmth of the pony's body crept through the old blanket I had used, and into my legs as I rode along abreast of my Ojibwa friend.

The sun was a red ball in the western sky. Kat and I didn't talk much on these rides, because there wasn't

much to talk about. In spite of all our hardships, I was happy here on the river, even though I had often been hungrier during the nineteen months we had been in the Settlement than ever I had been back in Scotland.

The ponies' nimble, bare hooves made a soft *cloppety-clop, cloppety-clop* in the lush prairie grass. As we loped along I began thinking about Kat, and about Father, and about our being here on the banks of the Red River, thousands of miles from my native Scotland.

We had been all right at home until the Highland overlords drove us out. I'd often heard Father talk about the way the heartless landholders swept the hills of all the small crofters, and then turned the land into huge, unbroken sheep runs which they rented to a chosen few who paid heavy tithes for the privilege. Hundreds of families, ourselves among them, were uprooted from their holdings and driven off. We had tried to fight, but it didn't do any good. Our homes had been burned behind us to make sure we couldn't come back.

Father had then taken Mother, Wallie, and me to the Scottish coast. I could remember that clearly enough. There he had tried to earn a living for us with his nets. The waters where he fished were strange and dangerous. The herring were few. We were half-starved. Our tartans were soon threadbare, and our bannock meal ran low.

That was three years ago, in 1811, and even yet I recalled vividly Father's grim face, as he and the others around him sought some escape from the hopeless life

we were forced to live. Our old homes were in ashes behind us; before us was the open sea.

Kat's voice broke into my thoughts. "Me have fish in bag here. You hungry, Ron-ee?"

I grinned at him. "Is it the kind with the big golden eyes?"

He nodded briskly. I went on, "I've just finished supper, Kat, but I can eat one of those anytime!"

His pony pulled away from mine, and once more I lived through in my mind's eye those terrible days in the old country.

I had only been eleven then, but I had a feeling that Father would find some way out. I wasn't wrong. It wasn't like him to feel sorry for himself. One day early in the winter of 1812, he burst into our freezing hovel on the coast, all excited and more like his old, carefree self than I had seen him in months.

"There's an agent of His Lordship, the Earl of Selkirk, in the village," he told us, "and he wants families to go to his new Settlement out in Canada. He's a braw lad, this man Selkirk, from what I hear, and I'm takin' his offer. We canna go on like we are now. They say there's plenty and to spare in that new country, so we're goin'. Praise God, someone at last is willin' to help us!"

That was how the four of us came to be on the old sailing ship, *Prince of Wales*, when she landed at York Factory on Hudson Bay a little over a year and a

half ago. I will never forget those long nine weeks on the ocean. We were still only a short distance off the Scottish coast when we ran into terrific storms that plunged the old ship about until we were all violently ill. For days we were battened below decks, wondering if we would ever arrive safely in the colony, about which we talked all the time. Then the wind died out, and we had a spell of calm weather.

The sails hung in listless rags from the spars, and the ocean was like glass. We ran short of water, and the days dragged into weeks. Just when we felt we would never, never see land again, the lookout shouted down at us excitedly, and in a few moments we were told that we had at last sighted North America.

For many more days we threaded our way through floating ice, and my heart sank when I glimpsed the barren shore through the captain's telescope. Then we were out of sight of land again, and the sailors explained that we were on the Bay.

I won't forget the thrill I had when at last we saw the log palisades and bastions of York Factory, the Hudson's Bay post where we were to disembark. We came ashore in small boats, and the Company officials were kind and friendly, even if a pack of their husky dogs gave me a bad fright by bounding out of the gates at me as I neared the buildings.

It felt funny to walk on solid land again, and it was even more strange when we sat down to a meal of food I had never seen before. I can still taste that first supper of moose meat, fried potatoes, and bread, topped

off with a delicious jam that had a queer, tart flavour. One of the clerks told me it was made from the low-bush cranberry which grows in profusion in the sub-Arctic. I was amazed to learn that these berries remain fresh and unfrozen on their bushes all winter long, where they can be picked even in the coldest weather by simply brushing aside the snow.

There were seventy-one of us in the party. But Owen Keveny, who was in charge, didn't waste a minute once we arrived. We hardly got used to being on land again, when we were piled, baggage and all, into big York boats. Even our sheep were herded into the huge, open-deck river craft.

I liked these sturdy York Boats, with their high, pointed ends, and big row-locks. A long sweep was lashed to the stern, and I never tired of watching the powerful young riverman skilfully steer our craft up the Hayes River on the last lap of our journey.

I asked him why we weren't going up the Nelson River instead, because it looked so much bigger on the map Father had let me study, but he told me I wouldn't like it much.

"There are so many rapids, you'd be on the bank portaging most of the time," he said. "This river is bad enough without tackling the Nelson."

"Portaging?" I asked wonderingly. That was a new word to me. The man laughed and went on.

"Portaging is simply lifting everything out of the water and carrying it around a rapids or falls. It's a backbreaking job."

"You don't carry *this* boat," I said unbelievably.

"Sure we do. It only weighs about seven hundred pounds."

He was right about the Hayes River being bad enough. We just managed about twelve miles a day, and before we reached Oxford House, a Hudson's Bay post on Holy Lake, we'd portaged over thirty times. We did a lot more of it, too, until we finally arrived at Norway House, at the north end of Lake Winnipeg.

I got my first taste of Assiniboia on that trip, and I liked it. The crew of husky oarsmen worked like a machine, pulling our boat against the current. One of them stripped to the waist in the warmth of the late summer days, and when he leaned on his oar the muscles in his shoulders bunched and shone in the sun.

I did my first fishing while we travelled, and the evening I caught a big white fish, our family and the Colbys who camped with us dined royally. The weather was fine, but the cool nights were new to me. The wine-like, clean air seemed to put new life into all of us, and I'm sure the limitless open space around us gave every person in our party a feeling of freedom that we'd never had before.

Our camps at night were almost gay, with flickering fires on the river bank, and the shrill blare of pipes re-echoing through the woods around us. I carried my share of the load on the portages, and I marvelled at the way our husky oarsmen lugged that big boat around the rapids and falls we were continually meeting as we ascended the river.

When at last we launched our craft in the clear waters of Lake Winnipeg, the steersman in our boat heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness," he said wearily, "that's the last lift between here and the Settlement."

The big York boats of our flotilla sailed southward, down the eastern shore of the lake, for about two weeks. Then we found our way into the mouth of the Red River. Father's eyes snapped with excitement as we neared the Settlement. We had been told that Miles Macdonell, together with about eighty men, had gone on before us, and that we were the second batch of colonists destined for the Red.

I asked Father what we might expect down at the juncture of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers where the colony was located, and his answer wasn't altogether reassuring.

"Miles Macdonell is the Governor, Ronnie," he explained, "and judging from what the officials tell me, he is only a couple of months ahead of us. He didn't leave York Factory until mid-July. I'm afraid we won't find much, but we'll make out all right. I can hardly wait to start building a cabin for us."

Father grinned at me, and slapped my shoulders. He was a big man, broad-shouldered and raw-boned, and I felt sure that he was taking to our new life already. I can't recall Father ever complaining. No matter what the circumstances were, he always seemed to be able to choose the good things and emphasize them. He kept us all in good spirits, and when some of

the other colonists started bemoaning their fate, he cheered them up and encouraged them. As a matter of fact, I heard Owen Keveny say to him one day, "John, you've been a great help to me on this trip. I wish all of our people were as enthusiastic as you."

We arrived at the colony late in October, 1812, having made the whole trip from Scotland in one season—about twelve weeks all told. The winter was almost upon us, and there certainly were not enough cabins to house our party at the Settlement.

Miles Macdonell, the Governor, sent most of us right on to Fort Daer, at Pembina, about seventy miles up the Red River from where we landed. Fort Daer, Father told me, was named in honour of one of Lord Selkirk's titles. Buffalo were plentiful there, and Macdonell's men had already built a neat little encampment, with sturdy stockades around it.

We were still trotting south along the bank of the Red, Kat and I, when suddenly his pony veered sharply towards mine. I leaned and swerved, balancing my body with the movement of my horse. Kat looked at me and said, "You ride good. Me like."

"I like it too, Kat," I replied dreamily. My mind slipped back to that first desperate winter we had spent in Assiniboia.

Father, Wallie, and I remained at the Settlement, which we had already named Colony Gardens; and started to work with several others to build log cabins,

but Mother went on to Pembina with the Colbys, who were now our neighbours. We all had a hard time that first winter we were in Assiniboia, but there were some pleasant things to remember. One was that we came to know Kat so well.

The Indians, whose tepees clustered around the forks of the river, were friendly right from the start. They were Cree and Ojibwa mostly, and there were some Assiniboines and a few Chipewyans from the North. The news of our arrival must have excited their curiosity, for more and more of them came to look us over. Their friendliness was soon to stand us in good stead.

"They can't get over the idea that we want to make our living howkin' in our gardens," Father told me, "and I think they like us."

They were shy at first, and just watched our people toil at the cabins. Then the occasional man would help a little. After a while, a number of them joined us, lifting the logs, lending us their ponies to pull the fallen timber, and showing us where good trees were to be had.

Two Ojibwas, a chieftain and his son, started to help Father, Wallie, and me raise the log walls of our new home. I soon found out that the boy's name was Kat-*ebec-a*, but that was too much for me to say every time I spoke to him, so he became just "Kat." His father's name was Katchebewan.

There was something about Kat, tall, taciturn Indian lad as he was, that I liked from the first moment I noticed him shyly watching us. He was a year or so older than I was.

One day just before Christmas, 1812, we were rolling a heavy log into its place on the top row of our cabin. The timbers were icy, and the pry Wallie was using slipped. The log fell at his end. I jumped out of the way, but Kat, who was helping lift with a forked stick, didn't quite make it. The thick timber struck him on the head and shoulder, knocking him down. When he fell, he thrust out his lean, brown arm to save himself, and his wrist was badly smashed by the falling log.

Father sent me running for the Settlement surgeon at once, and we fixed up Kat's injury as best we could. We put him in one of the cabins which was already finished, and when Mother heard about the accident she came up from Pembina right away, and looked after him as though he were really one of her own boys.

Our own cabin was soon completed, so Mother stayed right with us, taking Kat into our new home and fussing over him the way only mothers can. When at last his wrist came out of its splints, it was almost as strong as ever. Kat and his father never forgot Mother's kindness. It was Kat's turn then, so he promptly adopted us. Or I should say, he adopted me.

He taught me how to paddle in that silent, smooth way that eats up so many miles on the river. He brought ponies from his people's encampment around to our cabin, and showed me how to ride. All through the following summer of 1813 he never missed a chance to teach me how to look after myself in the bush and on the trail.

I looked at him now, as he rode on ahead of me a little and I said, "Kat, wait a minute."

His pony slowed and I came up beside him. He didn't speak. We rode on, leg to leg, through the glorious evening. I kept thinking how much I owed this boy for what he had done to make me feel at home in this great new land.

Amongst other things, Kat taught me how to throw a knife. We would practise for hours down in the clump of poplars at the foot of our plot of land, and I was almost as expert at it now as he was. I grinned to myself as we rode along, and let my hand rest on the hilt of my weapon as I recall how Mother would shudder when I showed her how I could split a leaf stuck on a tree trunk with moist clay. Father admitted grudgingly that I could throw a knife better than any white man in the Settlement.

Old Katchebewan, Kat's father, helped us a lot, too. During the winter of 1813-14, just passed, he was continually dropping around to our cabin with a plump, frozen white fish, a choice bit of venison, big slices of smoked cat fish, or a freshly-killed jack rabbit. We would have been hungry, terribly hungry, many, many more times if it had not been for Katchebewan's welcome gifts of food.

I taught Kat what English I could, and now, in June of 1814, he could make out in our language pretty well. As we neared the coulee, he grunted. I glanced sideways at him. He was a little taller than I was, and

his skin was the colour of scorched buckskin. His eyes were shining black, and his hair was held in place by a narrow, leathern band. He rode as if he were part of the pony.

"We soon be there," he remarked.

I nodded. In a few minutes we cleared the rim of the coulee, and walked the ponies down a steep, broken path to the edge of a little stream at the bottom. We both liked this place. A thick growth of cottonwoods and willows outlined the course of the creek, as it wound its way through to the Red River a few yards away. It was shady here, cool and mysterious, and I could picture all sorts of exciting things happening in this hideaway of ours.

We tied the ponies to a tree, and I took an Indian fire-bow and stick from the buckskin bag I carried. I looped the loose bow-string around the dry stick, which I held upright, and ran the bow rapidly backwards and forwards. In a moment the little pile of dry shavings at the base of the spinning stick began to smoulder, and suddenly burst into flames.

Kat grunted approvingly, as he reached into his bag and took out a bundle of green grass, in the centre of which lay two plump, fresh fish with round, golden eyes.

"We bake in mud, eh?" Kat remarked.

We had a dandy cooking-fire going in a few minutes. I packed the clean fish in moist clay and buried them in the hot coals. Kat was piling more embers around them when he scrambled to his feet, and stood poised like a statue, his head swung to one side, listening.

I looked up at him. "What is it, Kat?" I enquired.

The Indian boy put his fingers to his lips. I held my breath, but I couldn't hear anything. Before I could get to my feet, Kat was away, up the side of the coulee and peering over the edge, southward, towards Fort Gibraltar, the North-West fort which my father had warned us about. In a moment he was back, and his eyes were sombre as he spoke.

"Two men come on horses. Bois-Brûlés, me think. We stay here. They go by, maybe."

He stopped and looked at me, even more seriously than usual. "You have knife?" he asked. I nodded. Then he said softly, "Men bad. They try take us, we throw . . . here!"

He touched that soft spot in his neck, just above the collar bone, while my stomach did twitches at the thought of hurling my long, razor-sharp blade at a man.

I gulped, and shivers of excitement ran up and down my back, for the Bois-Brûlés, or Métis, as they were called, were the French-Canadian half-breeds who lived like Indians, and whom the North-West traders were inciting against us. The men were coming from the south, and quite likely right from Fort Gibraltar itself.

I could hear the sound of horses now. As the hoof beats slowed down, and stopped at the coulee's rim, Kat muttered softly, "They after us, all right!"

I peered up cautiously through a break in the willows. Two men were dismounting. They were Métis, sure enough. Their buckskin shirts were stained and dirty,

and each had a pistol stuck in the faded red sash around his waist. They wore moccasins.

They lumbered down the steep bank towards us. One was small and wiry, with a heavy face, thick lips, and bright beady eyes. The other was big and broad-shouldered, with sharp features and a dark, smooth face. A livid scar ran from his nose, right across his cheek. From their Canadian fathers and Indian mothers these Métis had inherited a physique that was as rugged as the wild life they led.

They stopped on the far side of the creek, looking at Kat and me through hostile eyes. The big one dropped his hand to his pistol butt, and stood with his legs apart and head thrust forward. When he spoke his lips moved in a curl.

"You Selkirk people. What you do here? Spy on us, maybe?" The man's voice was guttural and surly. "We see your fire-smoke. Why you so close to Fort? Maybe you get trouble out here, eh? Good you just kids. You men, maybe we take you to Fort. Maybe we do anyhow, eh?"

The half-breed leered at us. I shot a quick glance at Kat. His face was expressionless as he stood there, silently watching the men out of narrowed eyes. His arms were folded across his chest, and I knew the fingers of his right hand rested on the smooth handle of his knife. I had seen him throw that wicked blade so many times before that I knew, if the men tried to seize us, only one at least would get across the shallow creek alive.

My own fingers covered the hilt of my throwing knife which I carried in my belt, and I was a lot closer to the Métis now than I had been to any of the targets I had been using lately. It was like a nightmare, standing there wondering if I would be forced to hurl my weapon at the men who were threatening us.

Suddenly a cold anger swept over me as it flashed through my mind that some of these half-breeds had already mauled one or two of our own people. I picked out a spot on the buckskin shirt of the Bois-Brûlé nearest me.

Without warning, the smaller man who had not spoken until now jabbered a few quick words in French to his companion, and started towards me!



Chapter Three

SIGNS OF TREACHERY

MY FINGERS tightened on the handle of my knife, and I took a step forward with my left foot and let my right shoulder swing back easily, just as I had done so many times while we were practising. Kat did the same.

Suddenly the Métis who had started towards me stopped, as his companion muttered a warning and grabbed at his shirt sleeve. At such close range I knew we had an advantage over their clumsy pistols, and they must have known that, too. They certainly must have realized that we were ready for them.

For an instant the four of us stood there, frozen in our tracks, while Wallie's words raced through my mind . . . *trouble . . . trouble on the prairies*. Without changing my throwing position, I spoke, and my voice sounded strangely hoarse.

"We were out riding and we stopped for a bite to eat. We're not spying. We're not doing you nor anyone else any harm." The men stood still, studying us.

It was already dusk on the coulee bottom. The sunlight slanted across the valley above our heads, and struck the other side of the ravine, showing up the deep cracks in the rain-washed clay. The shadows looked like ragged chunks of black peat stuck into the earth. The spokesman of the pair opposite me finally said:

"Your Macdonell, we no like him. No like Selkirk men. We chase you out. Maybe, some day . . ." He stopped and grinned wickedly, drawing his hand across his throat in a significant gesture.

I breathed a little easier as he spoke for I sensed a note of bravado in his voice which hadn't been there before. I guess they didn't relish the idea of flying knives. Then, it is just possible that they recognized us, for Kat and I had earned quite a reputation for ourselves in the district showing off our skill at knife-throwing. There weren't many who could equal us.

The Métis, so Father had told me, were a cowardly lot, not given to fight fair if they could help it. I suppose these two were no exception.

When the half-breed spoke contemptuously of Miles Macdonell, our Governor, my sense of loyalty made me speak with less caution, perhaps, than I should have. Miles Macdonell had been kind and helpful to our family, and I recalled that when Kat had been hurt it was he who had gone to quite a bit of trouble to arrange for a sleigh to bring Mother up from Pembina.

"What have you got against Miles Macdonell?" I asked. "Why don't you like our people? Our colony can't possibly affect your fur catch one way or the other. We're just trying to make a new home for ourselves, and the Indians have been far friendlier than you. Why do the North-West traders want us off the Red River?"

The Métis's eyes flashed as he answered me. "Why your Macdonell try to stop pemmican trade? You still boy. You no worry. You tell men, worry plenty. You tell Macdonell if he stop pemmican trade, we kill. Paper he send us bad paper. We no want him here." He stopped and spat into the creek. "Good you just kids."

I guess I didn't realize at that moment what a serious business I was mixed up in. If I had, I wouldn't have answered the man as impulsively as I did.

"I may be just a kid," I replied, "but I know what a swivel gun could do to your precious fort. We have some six-pounders in our storehouse, and six-pound shot could make quite a hole in that stockade of yours. Besides, a lot of you would get hurt in the bargain."

The Métis looked at me with surprised eyes. "You got big gun?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes," I answered.

I was rather pleased with myself for remembering that Macdonell had several such weapons carefully hidden in our storehouse. What I didn't know was that he did not want this information to get to the Nor' Westers, and that the words I was so boldly speaking were to cause the near-downfall of our colony later on.

Thank heaven I didn't blurt out the fact that I had found another cannon in my youthful prowling—one that lay rusting in the small Post which the Hudson's Bay Company had on the river near our place.

I went on hurriedly when I saw the concern in the half-breeds' faces: "My folks know where I am. If I don't come back . . ."

The Métis interrupted me as they gibbered to one another in what sounded like a mixture of French and Cree. The big one was called "Pierre" several times by his companion. I'll never forget that name as long as I live, but at this time it held no special significance to me. Then they turned towards their mounts on the edge of the coulee. We watched them clamber up the slope, and vault to their ponies' backs. Before they rode off, Pierre, the big man, shouted down over his shoulder at us:

"You stay away from here. Tell Macdonell he crazy to send us paper. We no want trouble. You tell Macdonell he make trouble. We no make it. Pem-mican always keep going out of this country. He no can stop. Nobody can stop."

They wheeled and disappeared. I had no idea of how tense I had been the last few moments until they had gone. The knuckles of my fingers were white over the hilt of my knife. Kat merely turned to the fire with a grunt of relief, poking fresh coals around our baking fish. My heart was still pounding, and my mouth was dry. My knees were shaking as I threw myself down beside the fire and watched the glowing embers.

I realized now that it was Macdonell's order that was back of a lot of the hostility shown by the Nor'Westers and their Métis henchmen. Some of our colonists hadn't felt that order was necessary, but I had heard Father say that Miles Macdonell was almost past himself trying to find food for our people, and that if he felt such a drastic step was necessary, then it *was*—and that was that.

It was now five months since our Governor had issued his edict, on January 8, 1814. He had sent copies to all the North-West forts and posts in Assiniboia, but not a single one had even acknowledged receiving it, and we hadn't had a Nor'Wester come near the Settlement since it had gone out.

I hadn't read the document, but Father told me about it one day last winter, after he, himself, had carried a copy to Fort Gibraltar. It was simply an order prohibiting the outshipment of any pemmican, grain, fish, or other food from the huge territory of Assiniboia, which Lord Selkirk had purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company. The much-needed provisions were to be sold to our colony instead, and paid for in British bills. If anyone was caught smuggling out supplies, he would lose his canoe, cart, or whatever he was using to convey the goods out of the district.

The Nor'Westers did the natural thing, I suppose. Their forts in the buffalo country were the main sources of pemmican for the other posts which were not so well situated to garner food for the long, hard winters, so they openly defied the order.

The Indians told us that heavily-laden canoes were going down the river at night, carrying pemmican and other food. I still hadn't learned to like pemmican. It had a funny, leathery taste and you had to chew and chew to get the stuff down. Kat told me how the Indians made it from the lean parts of deer or buffalo. They cured the meat in the sun, then pounded it into shreds, adding dried Saskatoon berries to give it flavour. Melted fat was then stirred in, and the resulting tough, pasty substance was put up in bales. If kept dry, it would keep for an indefinite time. It was so compact and so nourishing that hunters and traders looked on it as a necessity on their long trips through the wilderness. I know myself that it didn't take much of the stuff to satisfy even *my* ravenous appetite, hungry as we often were.

When our people tried to buy it from the North-West forts in the district, the traders politely told us that they had none except for their own use. Yes, it had been the Indians who saved us from starving last winter. Even now, in June, we were just recovering from the effects of those long, lean months.

Naturally, I didn't concern myself too much about official papers and the like, but, I *did* get hungry, along with the other colonists. Our family was probably a little better off than most, because of the gifts of food Mother got from old Katchebewan, but even then we went short many, many times.

As Kat and I broke open the hot clay covering to get at our fish inside, I said, "Kat, I didn't know the

half-breeds were as angry as that. D'you think they'll go after the colony?"

Kat nodded slowly. "They no like you. They no like Macdonell. They bad, all right—try chase you out, sure." He looked up. "Me no like them," he added in a reassuring way, as if he wanted me to be certain that he was on our side.

We finished our fish, which had been baked to a flaky goodness inside their clay coats. I always enjoyed baked fish, especially these delicious, golden-eyed herring which Kat caught in the river. Then we mounted our ponies and made our way slowly out of the coulee. As we started back to the Settlement, the land *seemed* peaceful enough.

The prairies were purpling under the first tinge of twilight, and the muddy Red River swirled and gurgled as we followed its course on our way home. We could see the deep cuts in the clay banks, where the spring floods had gouged out V's, like the holes wedges leave when cut out of a freshly opened, crumbly cheese.

We were about a mile from the Settlement when I said to Kat, "Let's gallop from here in. The ponies want to run."

Kat replied, "Run! Good!"

He loosened his rawhide snaffle and leaned close over his pony's shoulder. I shook my reins, too, and in a moment we were pounding over the homeward trail like a couple of wild Sioux.

The ground at this point was not entirely level. It undulated in gentle slopes, making hollows and rolling

knolls. We were riding close beside one another when we raced over the top of one of these knolls, and tore down into the hollow on the far side. It was a little deeper than any we had passed so far.

We were almost on top of the three figures who stood on the trail at the very bottom of the hollow before either Kat or I saw them. I yelled and leaned sharply to the left in an effort to avoid the men. Kat swerved his pony to the right and cleared them, but one man on my side jumped, just as I shot past him. My pony brushed hard against him, and he went flying head over heels in the dust.

I jerked my leg up and out of the way, or we might have had a real spill. My pony was so excited I couldn't stop him until I was half way up the slope on the other side, just a little way ahead. Kat's horse was hopping around like a scared rabbit. My mount reared as I pulled about, intending to go back and apologize.

Without warning, the twilight was split by a red flash, and the crack of a pistol re-echoed across the still prairies. That bullet was intended for me, I had no doubt, for I felt the wind of it on my cheek.

I was so surprised and frightened that I just looked at the men stupidly for a split second. I had a fleeting glimpse of two Métis standing there, one with a smoking pistol in his hand. The man I had knocked over was still on his knees, shaking his fist angrily in my direction. In an instant Kat and I were bent low over our frightened ponies' backs, making for home in long, pounding leaps.



*My pony brushed hard against him, and he
went flying head over heels in the dust.*

When we were well away from the place and just below our cabin, we drew up, quieting the horses and allowing our own fright to subside. I looked at Kat. His eyes were wide, and I know my face must have scared him, even in the gathering dusk.

"Are you all right, Kat?" I asked shakily.

He nodded. We both dismounted and rubbed the lather off the ponies' wet flanks. Kat turned to me, his face even more serious than usual.

"Him Métis, one who shoot at you." He looked at me queerly. "You see the man you make fall over?"

I shook my head. "Kat, I wasn't thinking about anything except getting away from there."

He grunted. I happened to glance down at my pony's shoulder, and my eyes popped at what I saw. Before we started, I had thrown an old blanket across the horse's back, and had used a wide leathern strap to hold it in place. The buckle was hand-forged and rusty, and it had two metal tongues, one of which stuck out sharply instead of lying flat as it should have.

Hooked to it was a bit of cloth. In a second, the fabric was in my hands. It was a torn bit of tartan which must have ripped off the man I had brushed against back in the hollow!

I swallowed hard, because I knew that only our own settlers wore tartans, and as I gazed at this fragment of green, red, and white cloth, I felt sure I had seen it before somewhere among our people. I could understand why it ripped so easily, for all our clothing was threadbare by this time.

Suddenly I gulped, as the full significance of this bit of cloth struck me. I blurted to Kat, "That man must have been a settler!"

Kat just grunted again. Shivers of apprehension chased up and down my spine as I realized that the owner of this tartan fragment was meeting two of our Métis enemies secretly. A chill of fear swept over me. Those two enemies were so anxious to keep their meeting a secret that one of them tried to kill me as I wheeled to go back! No doubt I might have recognized the lot of them.

Kat was still looking at me as I stood there open-mouthed.

"I see man you run into," the young Indian muttered. "Him one of your men. Me no like, Ron-ee! Come, we tell Big Macmillan, your father!"



Chapter Four

BETRAYAL

WHEN KAT and I burst into our cabin a few minutes later, we were still shaking with excitement. I guess I must have pushed the door pretty hard. It banged back against the wall, and the candle flame sputtered in the sudden draught. Father-jumped from his seat in front of the fire, staring at me in alarm.

"Ronnie! Are you all right, lad? What . . ."

"Father!" I blurted. "Kat and I . . . we . . ." I had to stop and swallow once or twice before the rest of the words would come. Then I spilled out the story of our encounters in the coulee and on the prairie, pushing the tartan fragment into his hands as I finished.

He seized the bit of cloth, holding it up to the candle light. His eyes narrowed as he peered at it closely. When he spoke, his voice sank to a growl.

"Dwyer's tartan it be, Ronnie! A piece o' Dwyer's green, red, and white!" His big hands closed over it and I could see his knuckles whiten as he clenched his fist. "And him supposed to be away west on a mission to buy pemmican for Governor Macdonell," he went on. Then he added, "If they'd ever harmed you, lad, I'd ha' fixed them . . . the rascals!"

A picture of Tom Dwyer flashed across my mind at Father's words. Dwyer lived with his cousin at the northern end of the Settlement, and he wasn't very well liked because of his sharp tongue. He was a man of medium height, thick and strong, and his half-reddish hair and beard gave him a fierce, unruly look.

He had come to Assiniboia with the first batch of colonists in 1811, and had been a ringleader among the trouble-makers who caused so much discord when the first shipload of settlers had been forced to winter at York Factory on Hudson Bay. He was the rascal who set fire to the gaol of the Factory post when an Orkneyman named Findlay had been locked up for his rebellious acts during that first harsh winter Macdonell's settlers had spent in Canada.

But lately he had swung right around, and seemed to be most loyal to the colony. He could talk a blue streak, and I once heard Governor Macdonell say that he would have made a great trader, because he could make any deal look good. I suppose that was one reason why he had been sent to see if he could buy pemmican from the Nor'Westers after several others in the colony had failed.

"I wondered why Dwyer was behaving so well lately," Father went on. "By the looks of things, he's working with the Nor'Westers. If he is, then God be thanked you went riding tonight, Ronnie, or we might never have found out in time to stop his mischief. D'you think he recognized you, lad?"

I nodded. "It's likely he did, Father. Everybody in the Settlement knows Kat and me, as well as our ponies."

"Then he'll think you knew who he was too, so 'tis improbable that he'll come back again to Colony Gardens. He was up to something tonight, or the half-breed with him wouldn't have shot at you."

I watched Father rubbing the ragged bit of cloth between his fingers, and I wondered what he'd do next. I didn't have long to wait. He straightened and reached for his tam o' shanter.

"I'll be going down to the Governor's now to see what he wants to do about this," he said thoughtfully. At the door he turned and added, "Your mother and Wallace are over at the Colbys, lad. Don't wait up for me." He looked at me then as if he could hardly believe I had been mixed up in such an affair, and his mouth broke into an understanding smile. "I wouldn't say anything about this, boys—not until we make sure it *was* Dwyer."

Kat and I nodded our promise, and Kat said, "I go now, too."

The thought of one of our own people betraying us made me mad all over. I couldn't get to sleep, try as I might, and when Mother and Wallie came home I

was still awake, although I kept as quiet as a mouse while they went to bed. My eyes were still wide open when Father tip-toed in, ever so quietly, long after Wallie had started his steady snoring. I propped myself up on my elbow and called in a whisper "Father!"

He was beside my bunk in an instant. "Quiet, lad. And why aren't you asleep? You'll have the whole house up with your talking."

"What did the Governor say?" I started.

"It's Dwyer's, all right," he answered. "I'll tell you all about it in the morning." He tousled my head softly with his big hand, and I snuggled down under the covers, feeling properly pleased at having a Father who understood just how exciting life can be for a fourteen-year-old.

The next morning at breakfast I was fidgety as a cat, and Father looked grave and worried. Mother noticed his unusual quietness and asked, "Is anything the matter, John? You seem dumpy this morning."

He pushed his smoked fish to one side and looked at us from the end of our big, home-made table.

"There's plenty the matter, Molly," he said bluntly. "We've found out that there's a traitor in the colony who is working with our enemies to make things hard for the rest of us. Yesterday Governor Macdonell learned that tons of pemmican are being shipped out of Assiniboia by the Nor'Westers, and that a big store of it is in their fort at La Souris right now."

"Then we can buy some . . ." Mother began.

"They won't sell." Father looked at us and his eyes were heavy with concern. "Last night Macdonell decided to send some men to Fort La Souris, and force them to give us a supply. John Spencer, one of his aides, is to lead the party, and we're leaving tomorrow. He wants Wallie and me to go along because he knows he can trust us."

Father went on to tell about my experience the evening before, and how he and some others had been up half the night with the Governor trying to figure out what to do, and how Macdonell had angrily decided to show the Nor'Westers that he meant business when he had issued his order last January. But what had caught my interest was Father's words about the trip to La Souris, which I knew would be made in canoes. Suddenly I burst out, "Oh, Father! Can I come along? I can paddle better than Wallie! I..."

"Shush, lad," Father broke in. "You're too young for such a journey. You'd only be..."

"I could carry water for the camp. I could help watch the canoes. I could make myself useful, all right."

"You could get yourself killed among all those half-breeds and Indians," Wallie put in critically. "Will you stop bothering Father, and act your age, Ronnie!"

My eyes must have flashed my annoyance, for Father turned slowly and looked at the two of us in a way we both well understood.

Nobody said anything for several minutes. When Mother spoke at last, her lips were quivering.

"John," she said bravely, "need this raid be made? Naught but strife will follow it, of that you can be sure, and we should not make out too badly after this season's planting."

Father's voice was weary and his eyes were clouded as he answered: "Macdonell is a good man, but a stubborn one. He means well, but his proclamation last winter was a challenge to the fur traders. They must be made to obey it. There'll be no peace in our Settlement, aye, there'll be worse if he persists in tweaking their noses at every turn." He rose from the table and pulled on his tam. "I'm going down to the Governor's house to help get ready for our trip. We'll be starting up the Assiniboine tomorrow. I don't like this, Molly, nor do some of the others, but as long as Macdonell's our Governor we'll not disobey him."

I was still thinking about that canoe trip. "Oh, Father," I coaxed, "please see if I can come along! I found out about this in the first place, you know," I went on boldly, "and I'm the only one of our folks who's been shot at! I think I deserve a place in the canoe. Please, Father!"

"We'll see, we'll see," he answered hastily, and with a rather guilty look at Mother he hurried out. I knew then that there would be a good chance of my going, for Father always said, "We'll see," before he said "All right," especially if he wasn't sure whether Mother would consent. When I took my iron hoe from its stake on the log wall of our cabin and started for the garden, my heart sang with expectation.

If I had known what lay ahead I wouldn't have been so gay, but my concern for the moment was whether or not I could accompany John Spencer's party to La Souris. This fort of the North-West Company's was a small post, I knew, and I didn't think the task would be a dangerous one. Otherwise Father would never have given in to me the way he did.

Why shouldn't I go? I was fourteen past—almost fifteen. And so big for my age that most people mistook me for a man, especially dressed in the ragged clothing we were all wearing now.

Father was away all day, but in the early evening I saw him walking slowly towards the cabin.

"Who's going, Father?" I greeted him. "When do we start? I can hardly wait!"

He looked at me and his clouded eyes suddenly twinkled. "You seem set on it, lad. Aye, then, we'll take your mother over to the Colbys . . ."

"John!"

We both turned at the sweet voice, and there was Mother hurrying towards us. Her eyes were full of questions as she came up, and I suppose my face expressed so much sheer joy that she sensed the reason.

"John," she said in mild disapproval, "you'll not be taking the boy along, will you?"

My father blinked, smiled at her, then shuffled his feet in the ground. Suddenly he straightened and slipped his arm around my mother's waist.

"Aye, lass," he told her softly. "I'd rather have him by my side. This colony can use men like him."

I blessed the day when chance made these two my father and my mother, for she turned to me and said, "Your father knows what's best, Ronnie. Do what he tells you, and be careful."

I could see how she was trembling, and I understood how much courage it took to say those words. Suddenly I had my arms around her neck, and was kissing her as I had done so many times before when I had been either very happy, or very sad. I heard Father's husky voice say, "You're a good boy, Ronnie. You'll grow up to be a fine man."

I raced back to the cabin, whooping in delight. I went to bed early that night, and my dreams were filled with daring forays in which I struggled vainly to escape a savage Indian wrapped in a green, red, and white tartan blanket.

The morning dawned bright and cool. I could hear Father padding around the cabin, pushing the churls of dry cedar under the bed of coals left in the big stone fireplace from the night before. I went outside on tip-toe, after Father had smiled at me from where he kneeled on the hearth. I stepped forth into one of those mornings which stir one's imagination.

The early mists clung to the river, while behind the tree tops the sun was pushing its way into the heavens. The sky over my head was filled with light, while I was still standing in the half darkness. As I watched, the water in the river blackened as the mist rose and swirled above it, and the trees took shape beyond as quivering shafts of the sun's first rays swept up through

the mists and lost themselves in the blue sky above. I knew it would be a good day to start out to do what had to be done at Fort La Souris.

Father had the last of our fish and the hind-quarters of a big jack rabbit on the spit when I returned inside. He looked at me and muttered in a hoarse whisper, "We'll take Mother over to the Colbys before we go. Here, help me get breakfast . . ."

It was still early when Father, Wallie, and I arrived at the big canoe drawn up on the muddy, clay banks of the Red River. There were only a few people around, because Macdonell didn't want too many to know just yet the desperate measures he was taking to provide them with food.

John Spencer was there, and I could tell from the way he acted that he didn't like the job that lay ahead. He was abrupt and nervous, while Miles Macdonell was grim-faced and pale as he handed his deputy a copy of the embargo he had issued five months before.

I always liked our Governor, because I had found him intensely loyal and kind-hearted. Father had told me that Macdonell had been reared in the Mohawk Valley, far away in the East, and that he had served in the ranks of the famous Royal Greens Regiment. He had come to the county of Glengarry as a young Loyalist, and when Lord Selkirk had met him he was a Captain of the Royal Canadian Volunteers.

He was a courageous and energetic man, and he'd survived many a hard battle on the New York frontier. Lord Selkirk had taken him to Britain to organize and

lead the first expedition to the Red River, and he'd done a good job.

He stood straight and tall in front of John Spencer, and you could tell he had been a soldier, even if he was in tartans. His blue eyes were cold, and his hand trembled. He was bareheaded, and his unruly, black hair fairly bristled in anticipation of trouble.

"Mr. Spencer," he said stiffly, "you are empowered through this order to seize, if need be, any supplies which you have reason to believe may be shipped out of Assiniboia. My orders must no longer be flouted by these traders."

The rest of us stood silent while Macdonell went on: "I am Governor of Assiniboia, and by heaven, I will see to it that those Nor'West ruffians obey my commands. My interest is the welfare of our people, and they are going to have pemmican, even if it means a fight. I wish you good luck, sir."

He shook hands with Spencer, who pocketed the order. Then he turned and walked back towards his offices, his stride proud and purposeful. I forgot the serious part of our journey as I began to inspect the big canoe which was to carry our party up the Red River, into the Assiniboine, and on to the point where the Souris River flows in from the south. I always marvelled at the canoes which were used in this country. For the most part they are made by the Indians, and the one that lay before me now was a beauty.

It was twenty feet long, and about four feet in breadth. There was no distinction between the bow

and the stern, both ends rising to a sharp point well above the gunwales. The ribs were of cedar, bent like an ox bow, and the thwarts were of hard, dry maple. It was one of the voyageur craft, which I learned later had been secured from the Hudson's Bay Company. I could hardly wait to take my place among the crew.

We started to stow our supplies along the length of the craft, placing them to leave room for the paddlers without spoiling the balance of the canoe, which still rode high in the shallow water. We didn't take much with us—just food, blankets, and some cooking pots and other necessities. I helped carry the packs, and I could see Father glancing at me as I shouldered some of the really heavy ones. I was more thrilled than scared when I saw him carefully place our muskets, powder bags, and pistols in the stern.

We were almost ready to embark when I noticed a slim figure racing over the edge of the sloping bank and hurrying down towards us. It was Kat. He was breathless.

"You go up river with men?" he asked me.

I nodded proudly. "I'm paddling beside Father. We won't be long gone."

Little did I know that it would be many months before I would stand on the banks of the Red River again, and that when I did I would find only ashes where many of our cabins now stood.

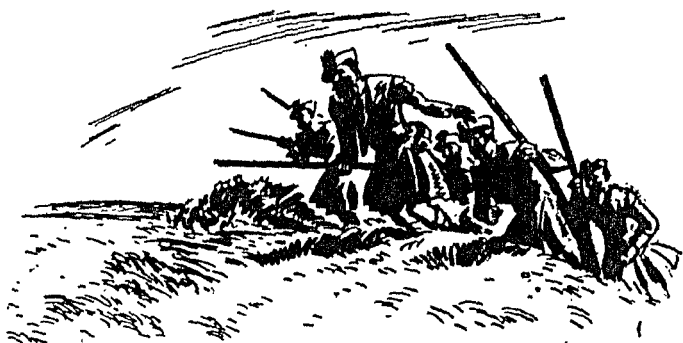
Kat looked at me solemnly, his dark eyes filled with alarm. The men were taking their places in the canoe now, and I heard Father say, "Come on, Ronnie."

Kat grunted. "Man who shoot at you no like you now. He not at Gibraltar. You going to Souris—I know! Maybe him where you go. You be careful."

"I'll be all right, Kat," I said hurriedly. "Please see that Mother gets enough fish while I'm gone. Good-bye."

I raced down the few intervening yards to where our men were pushing the canoe out into the stream, and scrambled into my place. Kat looked like a statue, standing on the shore, watching us depart. In a few minutes we were well out in the river, and the rhythmic dips of the paddles had already started us moving against the swirling current which had not yet lost the power given it by the spring rains.

I turned and waved my paddle at Kat who was still in the same spot. He waved back, then wheeled, and began jogging off in the direction of his father's encampment.



Chapter Five

RAID ON SOURIS

IT DIDN'T take long to fall in with the regular sweep of the other paddlers, and it wasn't too hard either because they were not stroking too quickly. Father looked down at me a bit anxiously at first, but before long I could see his glances of approval as I kept up easily with the rest. There were nine in our party, including myself, so there was plenty of room in the canoe.

My arms started to ache, though, before we left the Red and turned up the Assiniboine, and I began to wonder how they would feel before the hundred and forty mile paddle ahead was over. By the time we stopped for a bite to eat I thought they would break. We had paddled steadily in shifts for several hours, and it was almost noon.

We had a leisurely meal of venison, bannocks, and hot tea. Wallie made the bannocks, mixing the flour, salt, and yeast to a thick dough and putting the flattish cakes in the hot ashes of our fire where they baked to perfection in a few minutes.

It was a glorious day, and the green grass of the prairies spread away to the horizon like a rich carpet. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Father sprawled on the ground beside me while we ate.

"If you were a voyageur, now, Ronnie, you'd be eating salt pork, peas, and biscuits likely," he remarked, "and not good fresh venison and hot cakes."

"Is that why the voyageurs are called pork eaters?" I asked.

He nodded. "That's a staple diet when they're on the canoe routes," he replied. "There have been plenty of trips made in the West, though, on just bear's grease and cornmeal. How would you like that?"

"Not much," I grinned, sinking my teeth into a thick slice of hot meat. But I was thinking to myself that a long canoe trip with the voyageurs *would* be nice, in spite of what Father was saying.

We were on our way again in the early afternoon, and travelled all that day and the next. Just as we were getting started on the afternoon of our third day, John Spencer, who was in the bow, turned and spoke:

"We'll time our arrival so it will be dark when we pass Fort La Souris. It's not likely the Nor'Westers will be looking for anyone, but we'll take it carefully anyway, men."

We pushed on up the river which wound monotonously through the prairies. Most of the time we couldn't see much but clay banks, the trees along the edge of the stream, and clumps of brush. It was dusk when Spencer held up his hand. We stopped paddling.

"The fort is just ahead," he said. "We'll rest a bit, but keep the canoe steady. Pull over to the bank in case somebody should come by."

We came to a stop where an overhanging willow gave the men a handhold to keep the canoe from floating back with the current. It was practically dark when we let go, dipped our paddles, and approached the spot where the Souris River joins the Assiniboine. We went quietly past the North-West fort and turned into the Souris.

When we reached the first bend we landed, and pulled the canoe right out of the water. I was surprised at how easy it was to carry, as four men set it down on the bank. We camped very quietly and made no fire. I'm quite sure that no one in the fort saw us. The next morning John Spencer sent Father, Wallie, and two others back down the bank of the Souris River on foot, with orders to keep a sharp lookout for any boats coming to the fort. The rest of us stayed well hidden in the brush while our scouts surveyed the main waterway.

It was about two that afternoon when Wallie came hurrying back to where we had made camp in a ragged coulee which cut up from the Souris River and straggled east for some distance through the prairie. The fort was north and east of us, and I had already taken a peek

at it through the thick grass at the gully's rim.

Spencer, who lay smoking, scrambled to his feet as Wallie approached. My brother was the excited one now.

"A bateau is coming down the river towards the fort, Mr. Spencer," he addressed our leader breathlessly. "It is loaded heavily, and it likely carries pemmican."

"Good!" Spencer cried. "I hope it lands at Souris. I'll go back with you to watch it."

He and Wallie hurried away. They returned after a short time, and Spencer's eyes glinted as he spoke.

"They're unloading the boat, all right, and it *does* carry pemmican. We'll wait until they're through. Then they *can't* deny they have supplies in the fort. Get your muskets and come along the coulee bottom with me. We'll get as close as we can without being seen."

Father and the two others who had been watching the river joined us then, each of them seizing a gun and starting after Spencer. I didn't even get a chance to carry a powder horn, but I had my knife and I patted its sheath confidently as I followed. Wallie saw me and said, "You watch yourself now, Ronnie. Stay back and out of the way, and don't get hurt."

I nodded, scarcely hearing him. Little shivers of excitement chased up and down my spine as we crept along the coulee which narrowed rapidly a few yards from the river. I was in the rear. Spencer, up at the front of the party, clambered to the rim of the gully and peered across the prairie in the direction of the fort.

Suddenly he turned and beckoned us sharply. In a moment we were all running pell-mell towards the sturdy stockade, behind which I could see a line of roofs with wisps of smoke coming from the chimneys. But before we reached the gate, it banged shut with a clatter. When we pounded over the worn ground in front, a narrow grill was the only opening I could see.

"Wait here," Spencer said to us briefly. We stood back while he walked up and talked to someone inside. I saw him fish around in his pocket and pull out the copy of the order which Miles Macdonell had given him the day before. He pushed it through the iron bars. In a second it was thrust out again, falling to the ground, and I could hear the clang as the iron grill cover shut in his face. Spencer's quick voice reached us, but I couldn't make out what he was saying.

He wheeled and strode rapidly towards us, his face red with anger and his eyes blazing.

"They won't let us in," he growled. "Did you see them throw the Governor's order back at me?" He stopped and looked at us. "Their man, John Pritchard, didn't deny he had pemmican, but says he's going to keep it."

Father spoke up, "Did you offer to buy it from him?"

Spencer nodded. "Ay, but he refused, so we have no choice now. We'll take it! We'll not be going back to Colony Gardens empty handed, that I can tell you!"

"This will mean trouble—" Father started.

"Trouble or not, I'm taking that pemmican! If they want to fight, now is the time to do it. Come on!"

He moved off and we all followed him. It wouldn't have surprised me if guns had started blazing from the loopholes in the thick log stockade, but nothing happened as we approached the wall. Spencer looked around at us and his eyes fell on me. My heart jumped as he addressed me.

"Macmillan, come here."

I hurried to his side. "Run back to our canoe and you'll find an iron bar under the stern thwarts. Bring it here. And be quick about it."

I raced over the prairie, just now coming into its best in the warm June sunshine. I found the bar, and heavy though it was, I arrived back a few minutes later, quite out of breath.

"McGillvary, and you, Sutherland, pry off two or three of those pickets. We're going in whether they like it or not!"

The two young Scots seized the strong bar I had lugged up from the river, and in a moment an opening wide enough for a man to go through had been made in the wall. I fully expected to hear the rattle of gunfire as Spencer stepped into the hole, but strangely enough the Nor'Westers offered no resistance as the rest of us followed him in, with muskets at the ready. I was the last through, and came up sharply against Father, who had stopped.

"That's funny," he said to me. "Look at them, Ronnie. There's something about this I don't like. 'Twould have been more natural to have them try to stop us."

I was as amazed as Father at what I saw. The Nor' Westers stood around in the doorways, watching us through hostile, surly eyes. Not one of them had raised a finger to keep us out. Two of them gave us a mocking smile, and went indoors. I heard Mr. Spencer say, "The pemmican is in the store house. There it is over there." He pointed to a long, low building, just a few yards from where we had torn down the stockade.

Father was the first to reach it. He turned to Spencer immediately behind him.

"John, the door is locked. If we . . ."

"Break it open," commanded Spencer.

Father's lips were a thin line as he replied, "That makes what we are doing theft. I do not take to stealing, even to feed my family."

"Nonsense!" Spencer barked impatiently. "Here, let me at it."

He grabbed the iron bar from Sutherland, who still carried it, and directed two or three heavy blows at the lock. In a moment the hasp shattered and the door swung back. Father was watching nervously, and his face was serious as he spoke to me:

"Ronnie, I want you to have no part in this. Stay out of the storehouse, and don't lay a hand on that pemmican. Wallie and I said we would help and we will. If the Nor'Westers would put up a fight, I'd understand, but this isn't a raid. They're making it look like thievery, for some reason."

It wasn't long before our men were taking the pemmican bags out of the building, through the main gate

which Sutherland had now opened, and carrying them down to our canoe.

Spencer was elated. "They're afraid of us, that's all," he declared. "There's about six hundred bags, all told. We'll leave most of it with Mr. Fidler at Brandon House, and take what we can carry back to the Settlement."

Even I knew that wasn't a good idea, because Brandon House was the Hudson's Bay post just up the Assiniboine river, and for us to steal North-West pemmican and give it to the rival Hudson's Bay Company traders seemed like asking for trouble.

However, Mr. Spencer had the bit in his teeth and there was no stopping him. I stood back and watched. Wallie was working like a beaver, and the sweat rolled down his bronzed face as he shouldered bag after bag and carried it to our canoe. As I leaned against the stockade, keeping an eye on our men's coats, he came over and spoke and I recognized a new note in his voice. "Ronald, we'll pay for this day's work in blood before we're through. You're too young for this sort of thing. I wish you hadn't come."

I looked at him with wide eyes. This was none of the old brother-to-brother raillery I was hearing. For the first time I could recall, he was talking to me as man to man.

"It's all right, Wallie. I'll watch myself, and . . . well, thanks."

That I didn't watch myself was proved by what happened in the next hour. The dusk was settling now,

and there were still many bags of pemmican left to carry from the storehouse to the river's edge. I had stood in one spot for so long that I was stiff and fidgety. There wasn't a Nor'Wester to be seen now, even in the doorways.

Back at the rear of the fort grounds was a group of small log buildings, seemingly deserted. They were beautifully made, with the timbers dovetailed at the corners so skillfully that scarcely a crack could be seen at the joins. More to stretch my legs than anything else, I wandered over to the nearest one and was examining the workmanship when I heard voices inside. I didn't pay any attention until I heard the words:

"... and they must think we're easy to let them take our pemmican. If they only knew what was coming to them ..."

I looked around carefully. There was a window at the far side, covered by a piece of thin, scraped skin, stretched across the opening. I'd heard of these skin windows, but this was the first time I had seen one.

Like a little fool, I edged along the wall, not realizing that I was out of sight of my own people. I suppose in the dusk I wasn't missed. The voices were plain now, and my heart clogged my throat as I recognized the slow drawl of Tom Dwyer inside the room! So he had come to Souris!

I forgot all about caution; forgot that I was in the midst of a band of men who refused to oppose us when there was every excuse for violence; forgot everything except the fact that the traitorous Dwyer was inside,

bragging over the traders' plans, and I wanted to find out what he was saying. I could hear all the voices quite plainly now.

"... you're a good one, Dwyer," another man broke in. "We'd never thought of letting them steal our pemmican. That makes it thieving. It's a job, though, keeping our own men in hand."

"You've got to use your head sometimes," Dwyer bragged. "This'll turn the whole country against the settlers. Just watch!"

I heard the other man laugh coarsely. "What do you think of this, Mr. Cameron?"

Cameron! He was the Nor'West wintering partner who was in charge of Fort Gibraltar! I strained forward. What could he be doing here? I heard a deep, but not unpleasant voice say: "I've already told you that it would be serving our purpose better if the colonists were chased out without any bloodshed."

I heard him laugh shortly, then go on, "The sort of thing we've tricked them into doing here plays right into our hands . . ."

Whether it was my hot breath against the amazingly thin skin over the window, or just one of those mischances which turns the affairs of men in an instant, he had no sooner finished than the parchment in front of my nose split with a sharp 'ping' and I was looking straight into the startled face of Tom Dwyer who sat not two feet away from my own wide eyes.

It happened so quickly that I just stood there for a second, open-mouthed. But it was long enough for

the man beside Dwyer to swing his pistol butt in a vicious arc. The shout of alarm that rose in my throat died in a sob as the heavy weapon crashed on my temple. The room in front of my eyes exploded into a thousand blinding stars, and I had the sensation of falling endlessly into a black, bottomless abyss.



Chapter Six

CAPTURED

I COULDN'T figure out the darkness. It seemed to press in upon me, brushing against my face. There was a funny slap, slap, slap in my ears, too, and the swish of water. I lay there, vainly trying to think. Then my senses returned in a rush. My head was aching with a dull throb, and my arms were stiff and sore.

In sudden panic I thrashed out with my hands against the thick blackness, and realized then that I was covered with a pliable buffalo hide which had been touching my face. It fell away as I sat up.

I was in the centre of a big canoe, and the craft was speeding down a large river. I knew at once that it was the Assiniboine, because of its width. The regular slap of the paddles was what I had been listening to while coming around after that blow on the head. We were

flying along at a fast clip, running downstream with the current. Six paddlers moved as one man, urging the craft forward in sharp jerks which made it hard to sit upright.

"So, you're awake?" a husky voice growled at me, and there in front of me was Tom Dwyer, huddled in the cool air, with a buckskin jacket thrown across his shoulders. It was just breaking dawn.

"You're lucky Jacques' pistol butt didn't break your skull," he went on. "You've been unconscious all night. How do you feel?"

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, instead of answering him. I could see now that we were in a big, birch-bark voyageur canoe much like the one we had used ourselves to make the journey to Souris. There wasn't a speck of baggage in the craft—just a pack of food, the paddlers, Dwyer, another man who had his back to me, and myself. This was no inexperienced crew like the one with which I had paddled from the Settlement to Souris though, but a group of voyageurs whose deep, powerful strokes sent the canoe flying over the water in quick leaps.

As my senses returned, I remembered what had happened. I had a sudden, crazy desire to jump over-side and swim for it, but when I tried to scramble up I found that my feet had been tied.

Dwyer's harsh voice broke in: "Don't get any idea you can jump overboard," he warned. "The Assiniboine's current is strong here, and you'd only drown if you tried it."

"Where are you taking me?" I repeated. "What about Father . . ." My voice was loud and angry, I guess, for the man sitting ahead of Dwyer turned, and there was Duncan Cameron. My mouth fell open. I'd only seen him once before, when he had visited our Governor at the Settlement.

"Good morning," he said almost pleasantly. "I'm glad you've come around. Is your head all right?"

"If people would stop asking me how I feel, and tell me where we're going, I'd be a lot better," I said curtly.

Cameron grinned at Dwyer. "This young colt seems to have plenty of life, Tom. I like that in any man. You'd better tell him why he's our guest on this trip."

Dwyer looked at me. "You heard too much, Macmillan, to allow you to return to the Settlement just yet. That's why we took you along last night when we left Souris. We are on our way to Fort William . . ."

"Fort William!"

"Yes. Fort William. We'll time our paddling to arrive at Fort Gibraltar early tomorrow morning, and then be off down the Red before it's light. We've got one of the best crews in the country and they've been hitting forty-five or fifty to the minute ever since we left Souris. You'll be safe enough if you just behave . . ."

"But what about Father and Mother? They'll wonder . . ."

"If you're old enough to mix up in things like you did yesterday, then you're quite able to stand on your own feet," he interrupted gruffly. I had to admit to myself that he was right in that, anyway.

"There's going to be a meeting of the Nor'West partners in Fort William when we get there," Dwyer continued, "and they'll decide what to do about your troublesome Governor and the people he wants to feed by robbing us."

"You're one of those people yourself," I said boldly, "but you've turned traitor . . ."

With savage fury he reached out and slapped my face. Cameron shrugged and said, "That young one ought to be with us. He has spunk. Don't touch him again, Tom. He's only a boy."

My face stung, and my temper flared to a hot flush, but I couldn't do much about it. "Some day you'll pay for that slap!" I cried hotly. Cameron laughed, while Dwyer sulked under his buckskin cover.

Somehow, now that I was with a Nor'West wintering partner for the first time, I felt that they weren't such a bad lot after all. Of course, I was ashamed that one of our own people should desert us to work against the colony, but I thought I could detect a note of contempt in Cameron's voice, too, when he spoke to Dwyer. I liked Cameron the better for it.

Nor could I help thinking that Governor Macdonell might have straightened the whole thing out if he'd only been a little less official in his dealings with the fur traders. I turned to Duncan Cameron.

"I thought you'd be at Fort Gibraltar," I said. "How . . ."

Cameron smiled craftily. "You heard, a few things, I take it, while you listened at that window back there.

Your raid on Souris wasn't exactly unexpected, you know. I made sure that Macdonell knew we had plenty of pemmican there, and then went up myself to await your call." He looked dreamily over the scrubby bank. "Of course, Macdonell will be charged with theft . . ."

"So that's it!" I cried. "What are you going to do to our colony?"

"Never mind," Dwyer broke in gruffly.

Something stirred inside me, a sort of foreboding, as these men gloated over the position the colonists had put themselves in by taking the traders' pemmican. Cameron himself was obviously highly pleased.

I was still wondering what I could do about it when we reached Fort Gibraltar in the dark hours of the following early morning. My captors didn't waste a minute. One big fellow watched me closely while the canoe was stocked for a long trip ahead. Baggage, provisions, arms, and ammunition were piled high, and when we climbed in again the craft rode low in the water. It was still dark when we left Gibraltar, and dawn saw us far past our Settlement and well down the Red River.

There had been a dim light in one of the settlers' cabins as we passed the colony, and I began thinking about Father, Mother, and Wallie, wondering what they'd do about my disappearance. We scooted along, the paddlers taking turns at resting. My head ached terribly, and I guess I looked pretty white in the early morning sun which was now peeking over the bush on the east bank of the Red.

I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I knew, somebody was shaking me. I opened my eyes again, and this time I felt a lot better. A grizzled French-Canadian canoeman stood over me.

"We camp here, *mon petit*," he said in a deep, mellow voice. "You hongry, *oui*?"

The canoe was drawn up in a natural slip in the river bank, and the warm smell of wood smoke filled my nostrils. I gave up hope that any of my friends would ever catch up with us now. When I tried to move, I found my feet still tied.

"Undo my feet," I asked. The man went over to Cameron, who was taking provisions out of a pack, and spoke to him. He nodded, saying something in French. The voyageur returned to the canoe where I sat and said, "Me untie you, you no try get away, *non*?"

"I'll not try to get away while I'm free," I said. "But if you tie me up again, I'll do all I can to escape."

Cameron heard me, and said, "Let him loose to eat, then."

When my captors handed out the meal, I suddenly recalled what Father had told me a couple of days before. I was given salt pork, peas, and biscuits, and I felt a thrill in spite of my predicament as I realized I was with the 'pork eaters' and on a long journey, just as I had pictured while I had talked with Father about the voyageurs when we'd stopped for a meal on the way to Fort La Souris.

The next morning the river widened, and the paddlers cautiously picked their way through the sand bars

which lay in a treacherous pattern where the Red River spreads into Lake Winnipeg. We hugged the east shore of the lake, because a gale was blowing from that direction.

Late that evening we reached the mouth of a great river, which one of the paddlers told me was the Winnipeg. We stopped that night at the North-West Company's Fort Bas-de-la-Rivière where I was promptly locked in a small, cheerless room. It was deep dusk when we landed, and the next morning when we left, the country was shrouded in cold mist, so I didn't see very much of the place.

While I worried constantly about my family, I was beginning to enjoy the trip. For the most part the weather was grand, and we slept in the open with a bed of evergreen boughs for our mattress and warm blankets over us. I was treated kindly enough, but every night I was tied securely, and one or another of the party stood watch to make sure I didn't make a break for liberty. They were taking no chances on my escaping and returning to our colonists with the word that the Nor'Westers had tricked them.

Time and again on that trip I recalled the evening in our cabin when Father had said to the Colbys, "Suppose we send word to Robert Fraser with the first brigade to the Big Lakes." I smiled a little grimly at the thought. Here I was well on the way to the Big Lakes myself, and I began to wonder if Robert Fraser was a Nor'Wester, or if I'd ever see him. Of one thing I was sure: if I ever got to Fort William alive I would

find the Frasers and tell them that they had kin at the Red River Settlement. Besides, I'd heard so much about Annette that I was more than a little pleased over the prospect of meeting her.

The days wore on as we ascended the Winnipeg River. We seemed to portage more than paddle. I'd never seen a river as wild before. We struck roaring, surging rapids that swept down towards us through chasms of rock. We tramped around swift, treacherous half-falls which filled the air with flying spume. When we did meet smooth water, we had to battle the fierce current, and in some places the men used a tow line, struggling up the bank, and dragging the canoe behind them.

More often, however, we landed and our goods were separated into packs of a hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds and carried over well worn portage trails. Cameron told me that we were on the route which the Nor'West brigades used as they travelled east and west through this rich fur country. That was why the trail was worn five or six inches deep in some places.

I saw a tump line in use for the first time as our voyageurs lugged supplies over the portages. This is just a wide band which fits around the forehead, and to which thongs are attached, then tied to the pack. I tried it out myself, and it was surprising how it helped steady my load.

We had a real Canadian crew with us. They were a colourful sight, with gay handkerchiefs twisted around



*... silently inching his way towards the
unsuspecting Nor'West voyageur guard,
was Katl*

their heads, and gaudy L'Assomption sashes at their waists. They wore bright-hued shirts, buckskin trousers, and moccasins.

Yes, I must admit that I was enjoying the trip, and I was learning a lot, too, as I helped out as best I could. One morning on a smooth stretch of water, I took the place of a paddler who sat amidship in our craft. I'd never paddled with a voyageur crew before, but Kat's training stood me in good stead.

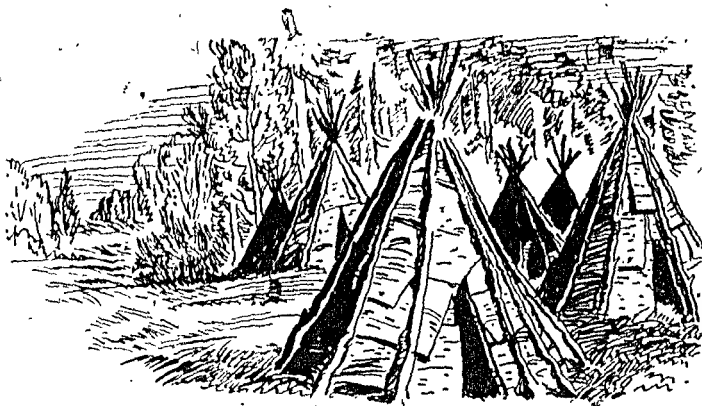
One evening about two weeks or so after I had been captured, we landed and made camp. It was coolish, and a fine mist in the air made the forest damp. It was hard to see very far, even in daylight, and a gnawing homesickness dulled my hunger as we sat down to eat. At last we got ready to sleep.

But for some reason I could not keep my eyes closed. I thought the hours would never end. Maybe it was the discomfort of the damp blankets, or perhaps it was just that I had so much to think about that I couldn't sleep. Certainly, I was still wide awake long after the men lying around me were snoring loudly.

I had spread my bed of spruce boughs on a rocky shelf, because the ground was damp. A few feet away my guard nodded, half asleep from the heat of the fire. I'd tried to figure out a way to escape so many times that I'd about given up. Every night my feet were trussed fairly tightly, with my hands left rather loose. I couldn't reach the knots on either wrist, nor could I get at the thongs around my ankles. So night after night I lay there, helpless.

I was looking out idly past my captor at the fire-lit bush a few yards beyond. Suddenly my heart jumped, and I started so violently that I was sure the guard would notice me. Thank goodness, he didn't!

The thick, wet leaves back of him parted as I watched, and there, silently inching his way towards the unsuspecting Nor'West voyageur guard, was Kat!



Chapter Seven

ESCAPE

KAT COULDN'T have picked a better night to try to rescue me. We'd all been wet that afternoon, so when we made camp a huge drying fire had been started on a grassy spot near a rocky shelf, where the branches of spruce formed an umbrella overhead. When our party turned in, the fire was so hot that we couldn't get near it. Cameron, Dwyer, and the rest lay under the branches, quite a distance from the blaze. I was at one end of the flat rock, separated a bit from the others. The guard was the only one near the fire.

How Kat might silence the drowsy Nor'Wester without arousing the whole camp, I couldn't imagine. The Indian boy came on, though, inch by inch, moving so slowly that it was hard to tell whether he was making any progress or not.

It must have taken him five or ten minutes to cover the few yards between the patch of leaves where he first appeared and the sleepy sentinel. I had an almost irresistible urge to yell when he was so close to the man's back that he could have reached out and touched him.

I saw now that Kat had a small buckskin bag in one hand, just like the one in which he carried game and fish on our rides back at the Red River. It bulged as if it was full of something. My flesh crept when he deliberately grasped it in his right hand by the corners and swung with all his might. It struck the guard's head with a dull, almost noiseless 'plop' which was lost in the crackle of the fire. The man started to topple, and I was amazed at what followed.

Kat wasn't much bigger than I was, but he went down on one knee and the man's body fell across his back. He grabbed the Nor'Wester's loose hand and pulled the inert form off its log seat. He gradually straightened, and there was the guard across his shoulders, just like a shapeless sack of grain.

As though he were a shadow, he moved from the fire-lit camp-site, melted into the bush, and disappeared over the flat rock towards the river. I could feel the cold sweat running down my armpits. There hadn't been a sound, not even a single twig-snap. I waited.

In a few moments I sensed, rather than saw, the leaves part again, this time almost at my head. Kat's long, lean arm passed close over my face, and I shivered at the sight of his slim knife clenched in his fingers. He reached to my waist and in a second I felt my hands

go free. Then he cut the thongs which bound my feet. He leaned over, his lips touching my ear.

"You move slow. Like me. Come on."

I struggled to my feet, stiff and cramped from lying on the damp rock. Kat took my hand, guiding me around the fire and to the granite shelf that fell away towards the river below. I was in my stocking feet, and Kat wore moccasins, so we didn't make any noise. The light of the campfire above us helped in picking out a trail where no loose rocks might slither down and give the alarm. I was sure my pounding heart would awaken the whole camp, but the men slept on peacefully.

It was black dark at the riverside, but I had already sensed that we were not alone. Kat whispered again in my ear:

"My people here. Have canoe. Come. Get in."

"Kat," I squeezed his arm, "how did you . . ."

"Be quiet. Tell in little while."

It was like a dream. I was in a canoe and flying back down the river before I realized it. The stream was quiet and wide at this point, and I lost track of time as my rescuers urged the canoe over the water at a terrific rate. Unlike the voyageurs, they didn't make a sound with their paddles. It seemed to me that we were in the middle of a vast emptiness, shut in by the swirling mist. I could hardly see Kat who sat in front of me, but the Indians knew where they were going.

Of course, at times we crept along cautiously, with the Indian in the bow feeling ahead with his paddle. We must have travelled for some hours, and I was

bursting to ask Kat how he had come to be on hand the first misty night we had had. I could feel the powerful surge of the paddles, and I think we went faster at times on this river than I had ever gone before in a canoe.

Dawn was breaking when we turned ashore. My Indian friends pulled the canoe out of the water, and one of the older men hoisted it over his head, starting up a worn path into the bush. The other packed our supplies. Kat beckoned me and in a moment we were in the forest, jogging along at a good rate. I never would have believed that things could be done so quietly, but since that first moment when Kat appeared in front of my astonished eyes, back in the Nor'West overnight camp, there hadn't been a sound except Kat's whispered warnings to me.

"Kat," I now began, "how in the world did you do it?"

"Me follow you to Souris. Hide on river bank. It dark, but me see men carry you to canoe. No time tell Big Macmillan at fort. Me come right after you all way down to Settlement. Get two my brothers help me paddle here. Send Father back to Souris to tell Big Macmillan no worry. We come after you. Near you all time, but you no know. Me born in village we go to now. Me come Red River long time ago. One my brothers know way back here good. Him big one there." He pointed ahead to the strapping Ojibwa brave who was carrying our canoe alone.

"Kat, I'll never be able to repay you . . ."

The Indian boy grinned at me, his eyes shining with pleasure. "Father tell Big Macmillan no good lot of men go after you. He say to your father, 'We look after Ron-ee.' Me good boy?"

"Kat," I said gratefully, "You're the best boy I ever knew." Suddenly I thought of the guard Kat had disposed of back in the Nor'Wester's camp. "Kat," I went on, "that fellow—did you kill him?"

Kat grinned. "Me no hurt him bad. Me fill skin bag with sand. Bang on head! No noise. Him wake up soon."

"But where is he? Did you tie him up?"

The Indian shook his head. "No tie. Use old Indian way. Legs around tree. Him no get away. Other men see him. They get him loose. No worry. Me no kill anybody."

I was a bit ashamed of myself for thinking that Kat would ever take a life if he could help it, even to save me, or anyone else for that matter. Time was to tell whether or not I was mistaken in this.

As we walked along, I pictured the guard, leg-locked around a tree. Kat had shown me this simple way to tie up a man without a rope or a single thing. It was uncanny. All you had to do was wrap a man's left leg around a medium-sized post or tree trunk, bring his right leg down across the instep of his left, then push the instep of the right leg under him and around the trunk again.

If anyone ever sits down or is forced down in this position, he'll never get away, unless someone lifts him

by the armpits, and loosens this curious leg lock, which simply can't be broken without help.

Kat told me once that some of the Indian tribes farther west destroy their enemies by leg locking them to a tree in a wolf-infested bush, and leaving them.

We were climbing a sharp path in the rocks now, pulling ourselves up hand over hand. How Kat's brother carried that canoe I'll never know, but he did, and all by himself.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He pointed to the north. "My tribe home over there. We come to lake soon. Cross. Go down small river. My people good. They help us."

We walked for about half an hour. It was a well-worn portage trail we were on, because it was almost four inches lower than the surrounding grass. Suddenly we came out on top of a ridge, and below us through the trees I saw a big expanse of water, stretching away into the wilderness with tree-covered islands dotting the surface like fuzzy Scotch bonnets.

We paddled across the lake, and into a narrow river which burst into rapids before we had gone very far. It was full daylight now, and I clung to the gunwales of our craft in alarm when the Indians made no effort to stop and portage. In a minute we were into the wild water, and for the first time I was shooting a rapids in a canoe.

With paddles flying, the Indians took our craft over a terrifying stretch of river. One minute we would be up on a crest, and the next deep in the trough of the

big waves that rushed over the rocks around us. Kat's brother in the bow watched the river like a hawk. We sheered close to huge boulders, avoiding the froth and keeping the craft racing through the black water which was travelling so fast it was smooth and seemed humped in places. Flying spray dashed against my face, and I must admit that I never thought we would get through without upsetting. My heart was pounding when we slid into quieter water once more. Another two hours' paddle and we came around a sharp bend.

Here the banks rose in a gentle slope to a spot where the brush had been cleared away from beneath the huge trees. I had a fleeting glimpse of tepees amongst the trunks, and wisps of smoke curled up through the sunlit branches above. Kat gave a short, strange cry and in a moment I could see several figures running towards the bank, where a small fleet of canoes had been pulled up, their smooth, yellowish, birch-bark bottoms shining in the sunlight.

In a moment we had landed and I was surrounded by a jabbering, excited group of Indians who all seemed to be talking at once. Kat must have been explaining what had happened, because they turned and looked in my direction, and an old man came over and stood in front of me. He had a blanket around his shoulders, which he held in place with both hands under the covering. He spoke to me, but of course I didn't know what he was saying. I looked around helplessly, and Kat, seeing my predicament, came over and began to explain.

"Him say, you friend," Kat interpreted. "You stay here plenty time. You hungry, him give you food. You need clothes, him give you. Him chief. Him brother of my father."

I bowed and, in the most dignified voice I could muster, I said, "My brother, I am grateful for your help. I *am* hungry. I am happy to be here with you."

Now it was the old Indian's turn to be surprised. He looked at Kat, who rapidly translated what I had said. The chief let out a shout, and turned towards the encampment. We followed him and in a moment I was offered big chunks of venison out of a pot which steamed away over a small fire. As I ate, the excitement of the last few hours began to tell. I got sleepy. I could hardly hold my eyes open by the time I had finished my meal.

Kat said, "You sleep now. Here, in this wigwam."

I crawled into a tepee made of thick birch bark, and I was asleep before I knew it. It was dark when I awoke with a start. I realized where I was, then rolled over and fell asleep again. The next thing I heard was the chant of the tribe's medicine man greeting the rising sun with his pagan prayer.

Kat wasn't anywhere near, so I took stock of the encampment. It consisted of ten to fifteen tepees, all made of thick bark, watertight and sturdy. Kat told me later that this was a winter camp, too. Iron pots boiled away over hot little fires. The women seemed to be doing all the work, and cute little brown children scurried about the place like rabbits. They were very

shy, and I noticed one and then another peeking out at me from behind trees and tepees, squealing with delightful terror when I tried to chase them. I was probably the first white boy they had ever seen.

The small babies were laced in cradle boards which their mothers carried on their backs or leaned against trees while they worked. Presently I saw a dozen Indian boys, about three or four years younger than myself, racing around through the camp, one behind the other. I was fascinated by the life of the Ojibwa encampment, and was watching the lads when Kat came up to me. He noticed my interest and said, "They play follow-my-leader. Good fun."

I agreed it was good fun. They raced through the forest, over logs, up trees, down the branches, into the river and out, just like playful young animals.

Kat suddenly asked, "We go back to your people now?"

I'd been doing a lot of thinking since I had been captured by the Nor'Westers. I knew that a meeting was going to be held at Fort William within a couple of weeks, and that the traders were going to talk about how they could do away with our colony. I'd heard them say so. The thought kept gnawing at me that I was the only one among our people who knew that, and here I was almost half way to Fort William already. Why couldn't I go on and see if I could learn anything that might put the colony in a better position to fight the efforts of the fur traders to make us get out?

With sudden bold resolve I said, "I'd like to go on to Fort William, Kat."

The young Indian looked at me as if I'd suddenly taken leave of my senses. I went on to tell him what I had learned. His eyes darkened and he spoke slowly. "You try find out what traders do? Some my people at Fort William, too. They help. Me ask chief."

An hour later, I was in probably the funniest spot I had placed myself in since I had come to this great country, full as it had been of strange adventures. Kat led me to a tepee. When we were inside he spoke.

"Chief say you brave. Him help. Give you Indian clothes. Him stain your face with berry juice. You look like Indian. Your hair—like mine." He touched my black hair. "Here. Traders no know you in this." He handed me a pair of buckskin pants and a shirt which was richly beaded in the exquisite decorations of the tribe. A pair of moccasins completed the outfit. Then he gave me a leather band to put around my head, and I discarded the worn homespun pants and shirt which I had been wearing. Finally he took a long red feather and stuck it into my head band. I was thrilled as I never had been before. Kat went out, and in a few minutes was back with a small birch-bark vessel filled with a dark, reddish liquid which he told me was made from the juices of boiled bark and berries.

He daubed it on my face and hands, pouring the remaining stain into a watertight skin bag to take along with us. I'd probably have to renew that dye on my skin quite often.

In a half hour I was completely transformed from the son of a Scottish emigrant into a young Ojibwa brave. Kat led me to a quiet pool by the river, and when I leaned over and saw myself in the glassy water, I couldn't believe it. I looked so much like an Indian that I had to pinch myself to make sure it was true.

One of the Indians who knew the waterways to Fort William told Kat he would go with us. We waited a couple of days to give Cameron and his crew a chance to get well ahead of us. When we started out, the whole encampment was on hand, watching us with serious, stolid faces. Kat's two brothers were in a second canoe in which they would return to the Red with a message I had given them for Father, telling him that I was safe, and on my way to the big North-West post of Fort William, to try to find out what the traders were up to.

We separated when we reached the Winnipeg River again. Kat's brothers swung west downstream. Kat, our guide, and I started east against the current on the way to Lake Superior.

I'll never forget the next three weeks. From the first tinges of daylight to deep dusk we paddled steadily. There was no sign of my captors who, Kat said, would likely go right on to Fort William, since to start a search for me would obviously be useless.

We stayed on the Winnipeg River for many days, then portaged over to another stream. After that we crossed so many different lakes and paddled down so many connecting rivers that I lost all count of them.

When we came to one huge body of water, Kat said, "This Lake of Woods. Big!" After we had crossed it he explained, "We come next to Rainy Lake. Not be long now."

A few days more and we worked north toward Dog Lake, struck the upper stretches of the Kaministiquia River and started down its curling course. We hadn't paddled very far when Kat told me that we'd better go pretty carefully because Fort William was at the mouth of the river, and it was likely we would meet some of the North-West fur brigades if we stuck to the open. So for a couple of days, we hid in the bush during daylight, and travelled in the bright moonlight.

The river widened and twisted as we neared Lake Superior. Kat's tribal brother knew the trail, all right, because one night he said, "We travel daylight tomorrow. Big falls ahead. Kakabeka. We soon see fort."

And he was right. We decided to continue paddling on in the daylight because the river was swift below the falls. We portaged around Kakabeka, which was one of the most majestic sights I had seen. We could hear the thunder of the falling water for a long time after we put the canoe in the river again. In a few hours we caught sight of rising smoke, and when we came around the next bend, there was the great post of Fort William, with its high palisades and its busy river front.

We were still some distance away when I said to Kat, "We'd better hide our canoe and our supplies in the

Kat stopped at the edge of the brush and peered out, up and down towards the river, and back to the far end of the clearing, which was several acres in extent. Then we turned to the left, away from the river and skirted the forest, staying well under cover as we hurried along.

In a short time we came in sight of a few tepees, set on a sheltered knoll. When Kat saw them he said, "Tepees belong my people, me think. Me ask Ona-bedac." He turned to our guide, who certainly was a silent Indian. I hadn't heard him speak a dozen words since we had left the Ojibwa encampment almost three weeks before. They talked for a few minutes, and then started away together. Over his shoulder, Kat said, "You wait."

I watched them enter the encampment, and in a minute or so they were the centre of a group of Indians who listened solemnly as Kat talked to them. I came up slowly. There was the usual collection of dogs and children around the wigwams. A couple of rude shacks flanked the camp, indicating that it was a more or less permanent one. Kat beckoned to me. I went over.

I was still in my Indian disguise, of course, and I suppose the Ojibwas thought that I was one of their own kind. Kat must have told them that I was really a white boy, because they all turned suddenly and stared at me. One of them sidled up to my shoulder and pulled back my shirt, exposing my white skin. Then they all grinned at one another, and at me. I could see that they were highly amused at my get-up.

Kat continued chattering away. His Ojibwa friends waved their hands around, pointing first at me, and then at the fort down on the river. Apparently I was the subject of their conversation, but, of course, I couldn't make out a word they were saying.

Finally Kat nodded his head in agreement to something or other, and they all began bobbing their heads up and down with him. I couldn't help grinning at their gestures, but the smile faded from my face as soon as I heard how they proposed getting me inside the headquarters of the great North-West Company.

Kat beamed. "Cameron here all right. Dwyer too. Other traders from Montreal. Long palaver in Council Room tonight. My people, they help get you in. You hide. You hear whole talk. Good, eh?"

A young lad from Lord Selkirk's colony in the Council Room of the Nor'Westers, the very inner sanctum of the 'Lords of the Lakes and the Forests,' where the hard-bitten partners of the Company sat in secret conclave! I looked at Kat with unbelieving eyes.

"How in the world will I get in?" I asked.

"My people help carry food to meal in Great Hall. They in, out, all around. Two stay here. We take place. My friends say 'Big dish-cupboard in meeting room. Him hide under. Hear good.' You take tray to table. Go right on through door at end of Big Room. It lead to Council Room. Me, my friends, we go ahead work, carry food. Nobody miss you. Good trick, eh?"

I agreed that it was a good trick if I could do it. "When are we going to the Great Hall?" I asked.

"Today-afternoon," he replied. "Come. We look at fort now, so you know where to run if traders see you in room." His eyes sparkled and he grinned again, as if he were looking forward to some excitement after our long, tiring journey over the fur-trade route. I felt somehow that we'd get plenty of that before we left this North-West stronghold, and I was right.

One of Kat's copper-coloured friends, who knew the lay-out of Fort William thoroughly, came with us. We crossed the fields and gardens, went down along the walls to the front of the fort, where the wide gates looked out over the Kaministikwia River. A sturdy wharf had been built on the banks, and it extended the whole length of the palisades.

My eyes widened as we approached the gates. Encamped in the open and along the river were literally hundreds of voyageurs, soldiers, half-breeds, and hangers-on, all gathered for this annual feast of the Nor'Westers. Early in the day though it was, they were already dancing, singing, and gamboling about in confusion. I could see that the wild revel of the coming night was getting started hours ahead of the feast.

We strolled towards the gates and entered unnoticed. I'll never forget my first glimpse of the inside of Fort William.

In the centre of the spacious enclosure rose the big wooden building whose roof and upper storey had caught my eye that morning. It was an elegant place, with a fine veranda about five feet above the ground, and a balcony on top. Two other large structures stood

at each side, and in the east of the square I could see a warehouse, which I recognized by the bustle and rush of business around its doors, and by the furs being carried inside.

Beyond was a substantial structure of stone with a metal roof, which I guessed must be a powder magazine. Dozens of other buildings, large and small, stretched away to the walls, and a tall bastion set at an angle of the fort, looked out over Lake Superior.

We walked through the roughly-made streets. The village was crowded. It was a colourful, exciting sight. The brilliant reds of the voyageurs' shirts flashed among the sombre garments of the hunters and the smoky buckskins of the Indians. Soldiers' uniforms added gay hues to the noisy, animated scene, and everybody seemed in the highest spirits.

It was a little scaring to walk among so many people after being alone in the bush with Kat and our guide so long, but it was a thrill, too. I couldn't shake the notion that I was going to be stopped and questioned, forgetting that my Indian disguise made me only one of the scores of natives who scurried among the buildings, or sat in cross-legged groups in the shade, smoking their long, thick pipes and drowsing in the warmth of this late July day.

After we had wandered through the fort, I said to Kat, "I wonder if we could find out where the Frasers live?"

He looked at me queerly.

"You like see girl?"

BUCKSKIN COLONIST

face reddening under its stain. "No,"
"but I want to tell them about their
ed River."

ly. "Me find. You wait. No talk
I."

from the Ojibwa encampment dis-
I wandered down towards the
was given over to the shelter,
of canoes. The place was
bark craft of all sizes and
bottoms looked like scores
ing in the afternoon sun.
with gum pots over open
shing off new canoes.

where I had left my two
place gave me a feeling
frightening. In about
g. I went over to meet

plained. "Me find out
place. You like girl,

you stop talking about
r even seen her."

our way to the far side
ouldn't get over the size
ve covered several acres,
ew scattered cabins on the
immense.

"Is it far?" I asked.

"Soon be there. It close to wall."

We came to a small, neat log house, which had been built just a few yards inside the stout palisades. I started for the door, but Kat pulled me back by the sleeve.

"You look like Indian. You be careful," he warned.

I hadn't thought of that, but decided I would take a chance on it, so I strode up the walk and knocked. I could hear someone scurry around inside, and in a moment the door swung open.

A young girl looked out at me through startled eyes. She drew back when she saw what she thought to be an Indian, but I quickly said, "I'm not an Indian. My name is Ronald Macmillan, and I bring news from the Colbys at the Red River."

"You . . . you're Scotch, like Mother and Father!" she said amazedly. "What are you doing . . ."

"If I'm seen here with you," I put in hurriedly, "there'll be trouble. Maybe I'd better come again."

She looked around helplessly. With sudden resolve she grabbed my sleeve, and in a moment I was inside. I looked at this girl whom I had never met but really knew so well and said, "Are you Annette?" She nodded and smiled, and I asked, "Your father—is he here?"

She shook her head. "No. But Mother is only down at the store buying provisions. What about our kin? We didn't know any of them were in this country. Oh, do tell me about them!"

As I talked, I studied her closely. She was tall and straight, and her hair was black as midnight. She would be about my age, I judged. Her smooth, oval face lit up when I told her about her aunt and uncle, the Colbys, at the Red River, and how they talked about her so much; and her bright, blue eyes dulled as I disclosed how the Nor'Westers were making life miserable for the Selkirk settlers.

She asked question after question. We had been talking for some little time when an urgent rap sounded on the door, and in a second Kat burst into the room. Annette leaped to her feet, and her hand flew to her mouth in surprise. I suppose it's not often that two wild-looking Indians press into a girl's home within fifteen minutes. I explained quickly, "This is Kat. I've told you about him."

Kat's face was grave. "Cameron come this way. With woman. Maybe he come here."

I jumped to my feet. Annette ran swiftly to the door. She turned. "It's Mother! Please don't go! Wait!" she cried as Kat and I started quickly towards the back door.

"That's the man who took me prisoner. Don't tell him you've seen me. We'll stay close by."

Kat and I left the door ajar, and clung to the back cabin wall. It was a good place to hide, because there was only a space of a few feet between the inside of the palisade pickets and the cabin.

I heard Annette greet her mother. Then a sweet voice spoke, and it sounded so much like home that a quick

feeling of sadness ran over me. I was all ears, though, as I leaned forward to catch the words.

"Annette, child, you look as though you had seen a ghost. Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, yes, Mother! Oh, yes! Will you have a seat, sir?"

I heard Cameron say, "I'll not bide, Mrs. Fraser. But I promised Robert I would give you his message. It may be another month before he gets home."

Robert, Annette's father, I thought. Cameron went on: "He's coming along fine, but he'll be laid up at Rainy Lake for a little while yet. He said for you not to worry."

"It was good of you to see me," she replied softly.

I heard the door shut, and I was still trying to figure out what had happened to Robert Fraser when Annette burst out with, "Oh, Mother! I've heard something wonderful!" She told Mrs. Fraser about the Colbys, and about my coming, and in another minute her head popped outside and Kat and I were dragged into the room by her strong, eager arms.

Mrs. Fraser stood aghast at the sight of us. She was tall and straight, too, and her eyes were blue like her daughter's. I had to repeat my story. When I had finished, I asked, "What happened to Mr. Fraser?"

Her eyes clouded. "About seven weeks ago Robert and his paddlers were bringing a load of furs to the fort here, when they had an accident. Robert's leg was broken. He was lucky, though, because the other four in the canoe were drowned. Some Nor'Westers found

him and carried him to the fort at Rainy River. I got a note from him shortly after he was hurt, and Mr. Cameron saw him just a while ago when the wintering partners of the Company stopped at Rainy Lake on their journey to the meeting here tonight."

"I don't trust him," I said bluntly.

"Trust whom?"

"Cameron. He's the one who kidnapped me, remember."

"Wasn't it Dwyer, really?"

"Well, Cameron helped."

"Robert always found the Nor'Westers fair men."

"They haven't been fair to us."

Then she plied me with question after question about the Colbys, our next door neighbours back in Colony Gardens. Her eyes shone as I told her about her brother and his wife.

"I wish Robert would take us out to the Red River," she murmured. "How I'm beginning to hate these furs that are causing so much strife and sin. Listen . . ." There came to our ears the growing roar of hundreds of voices. Then she went on: "We hear little else these days except tales of trouble between the two Companies."

Annette said, "Maybe Father will go west after he gets well and can come back to us. Oh! How I hope he does! I'm . . . I'm afraid here . . . afraid . . ."

Kat had stood silently watching us. Suddenly he said to me, "Time we go."

I breathed a little more easily when my companion did not mention the job that lay ahead for me, and we

departed at once. We were back in the Indian encampment by early afternoon, and when Kat and I, together with a dozen others from his tribe, started towards the Great Hall, I was filled with a great many misgivings.

Nobody bothered us, nor even gave us a glance as we pushed towards the building. It seemed to me that everybody in the village was in the streets. One of the Indians led the way into the big kitchen which was under the huge banquet hall, and my eyes popped when I saw the food being prepared for the feast.

Game of all kinds lay on the tables—venison, ducks, wild geese, partridge, and more, and there was a table laden with big, white-bellied fish, just brought in from Lake Superior. I saw buffalo tongues from the prairies, beaver tail, and other delicacies, and in open boxes along the wall lay wines, cheese, candied fruits, and a lot of other food I had never seen before, brought to Fort William all the way from Montreal, so Kat told me.

He nudged me. "Carry big plate upstairs. You no stop and look. They ask you why . . ." He drew his index finger across his throat.

I gulped and picked up a tray laden with cold partridge breasts, turned, and joined the throng of Indian servants who plodded across the room and up a dark, rough stairway. I had a fleeting glimpse of the men who were doing the cooking. They were white men and they wore funny, tall, white hats.

"Nor'Westers bring cook-men all way from Montreal," Kat told me. "This best meal in world. Come on."

I climbed the crude steps and entered the banquet hall. My breath sucked in at the sight. It was a huge room, lofty-ceilinged, with several parchment windows down either side. The walls were covered with portraits. As I walked down beside the tables which would easily seat over two hundred people, I saw a painting of King George III whom I knew was still the reigning monarch of England. Then I came to one of the Prince Regent, another of Lord Nelson, another very large one showing the Battle of the Nile.

Up near the head of the table I stopped and gasped at the sight of a wonderful map of the country where the fur trade was carried on. I found out later that it had been done by a famous explorer called David Thompson.

As I walked with the tray on my shoulder, I glanced at the end of the room. The marble bust of a square-jawed man glared down at me, To one side a door broke the expanse of log wall.

Kat said, from beside me, "Stone man, him McTavish, big Nor'West chief." Then he edged close to me. "You carry food to very end of table. See door? That meeting room in there. Nobody inside now. You go in. Remember. Big dish-cupboard. Get under quick. Nobody see you."

I edged my way along the table. I glanced around, setting the tray down carefully. Kat, and the dozen others from the encampment who had engineered this daring plan, casually crowded around, forming a moving, human screen between myself and the rest of the

room. I quickly pushed the door open, and popped inside.

It was gloomy in the meeting room. I stood still for a moment, while my pounding heart quieted and my eyes became accustomed to the half light.

Then I saw what I was looking for. It didn't take me long to scurry past the polished Council table and the big easy chairs, and force my body under the end of the huge sideboard where rows of glass decanters tinkled as I squeezed in. It was a beautifully made piece of furniture, with a kind of filagree of carved wood making a false front from the drawers to the floor. I could peek out through the holes. It was so long that no one could detect me from the ends.

I lay on the floor, hugged against the wall, with the dusty bottom of the lower drawer not ten inches above my face. It was a perfect hiding place, but if anybody should ever find me I wouldn't have a chance of getting away. It was hard enough to squeeze into this spot, let alone get out again in a hurry.

I had a sudden qualm of doubt when I realized soberly that, if I was discovered eavesdropping in the sacred Council Hall, where the policies, rights, and privileges of partnership in the powerful North-West Company were discussed in utmost secrecy, I would probably never leave the Great Hall alive.

I must have lain there for hours—at least it seemed that long. At last I got so cramped that I dared to flex my legs when the stiffness threatened to tie my muscles in knots.

I listened to the revelry going on in the banquet hall outside as the huge throng feasted and sang, and the shrill blare of the pipes filled the air. I could hear violins rasping in time to the stomp, stomp, stomp of many feet, and the clear notes of a flute added droplets of sweet sound to the roaring clamour of the great, night-long feast.

Suddenly my throat tightened. I heard the door open, and the sound of loud voices and laughter filled the room. I cautiously turned my head and saw several pairs of very unsteady feet taking their places around the table. My muscles tightened, too, when I suddenly noticed two pairs of buckskin-clad legs just a few inches from my face.



Chapter Nine

DISCOVERED

THE LEGS belonged to two native servants, I felt sure, for the men padded steadily between the sideboard and the table, and I could hear the silvery tinkle of the decanters as the men served their masters.

Almost everybody was talking at once, and at least eighteen or twenty men sat around the room. I strained to catch the words when someone's deep voice said, "Now, Cameron, what about this fellow, Selkirk? Are you going to let him lord it over you out in Assiniboia, or are you going to put a stop to his high-handed actions?"

The answer was lost to me in the babble of voices which followed. Every Nor'Wester in the room was bitter about Lord Selkirk's attempt to establish a colony on the Red, I could tell that. They shouted and

banged the table, denouncing the Earl and threatening all sorts of dire things. At last I heard Cameron's voice clearly.

"... and they're having a bad time out there," he was saying. "I think a little persuasion of the right kind can be used to turn them against Selkirk. Leave it to me and Alexander, here. I think we can handle the whole affair."

I didn't know who Alexander was, but I found out a while later in a most dramatic way. There was a loud chorus of assents. Then I heard the deep voice say, "Remember, Cameron, they're Scots like ourselves. I want no bloodshed if you can help it, but that Settlement must be broken up."

How long I lay there, I don't know. It must have been a good part of the night. The meeting went on and on. I had had no idea until then how bitter had grown the rivalry between the Nor'Westers and the Hudson's Bay men. For hours the traders in the Council Room schemed and planned to outwit their rivals in the scores of posts of the West and North.

Tales of robbery and of being robbed were told, and threats were made. I heard a lot of place names mentioned, some of which I did not know—Qu'Appelle, The Saskatchewan, Athabasca, and others I couldn't catch.

I dozed off in spite of myself, and when I came to with a sudden realization of what was going on around me, I was hearing the rough scuffle of feet on the floor. The voices were getting fainter and fainter. Presently

the door closed, and there was silence. The Indian servants cleaned up the glasses, and in a little while they, too, went out through another door.

I waited. One tall candle still glimmered faintly on the table. I eased myself out from under the sideboard, and attempted to get to my feet, but my knees buckled at first, they were so cramped. I reached down and kneaded my calves, and in a minute or so I was all right. It was almost dark in the room. I could hear the raucous yells and music from the Great Hall outside where the festivities seemed to be still at their height.

I tip-toed to the door leading to the banquet room, but dared not open it for fear of being seen. Then I slipped back to the other door, through which the Indian servants had disappeared. I tried it cautiously. It was locked.

Suddenly I noticed a parchment window above the sideboard. I started towards it, and had barely reached the table when I heard the latch rattle at the front of the room and a shaft of light shot in just missing me by inches.

I scarcely had time to dive under the big table in the centre of the room before three men entered from the Great Hall. Apparently I hadn't been noticed in the darkness. I lay as still as a mouse, in spite of the fact that I was lying on something hard which dug sharply into my ribs. I dared not move to see what it was.

One of the men who had surprised me lit four or five candles. Then my eyes widened as I heard a

voice say, "Alexander, and you, Tom—now that we've got the job of settling this Selkirk affair, I just wanted to talk to you both quietly for a moment. I think we can take care of it together quite effectively."

It was Duncan Cameron!

"There's no place in this country for gardeners," growled the second man. "If our Company is to survive we've got to stamp out any attempt at settlement before the idea spreads. Blast them off the prairies, I say!"

"And have the militia at your heels as soon as the news reaches the authorities?" Cameron argued. "No. We're going to run into this sort of thing in other places, likely, too. What we've got to do is to make the country so uninviting that none of them will want to stay—and no more will want to come."

Another voice cut in, and I almost choked as the man asked, "What are you going to do, Duncan?"

It was Tom Dwyer!

Cameron laughed loudly. "My friend, there are more ways of killing a cat than drowning it in milk! But that proverb gives me an idea. Yes. An idea."

"You're a smooth one, I know, Cameron," I heard the second voice say, "but as sure as my name is Alexander Macdonell, any means we take to keep the country free of settlers will end up with violence. It can't be any other way. They want to stay. We don't want them around. There's going to be a fight."

I could scarcely believe that my old enemy, Tom Dwyer, stood only a few inches away from me. I didn't know the man who called himself Alexander

Macdonell, but I had a hazy recollection of having heard Father say that he was a Nor'West wintering partner from one of the posts away west of the Red River Settlement.

"Why do you think so?" asked Dwyer.

"Wait till the Métis around Qu'Appelle hear about settlers spoiling the fur country. They'll likely come down to the Red and take things in their own hands."

"Well, whatever we do we've got to protect our fur trade. Can you imagine what would happen if we let this sort of thing go on? I can't see why the Hudson's Bay men don't see it themselves. You can't grow grain and trap foxes at the same time." It was Cameron who said that.

"Suppose we go back west together," Macdonell suggested. "We can work out a lot of details as we travel."

"Suits me." Cameron's voice was oily as he went on. "I don't think I'd talk to the other partners too much about what can be done. I'm sure we can act on our own well enough."

"Whatever you say," Macdonell agreed.

"Now, Tom," Cameron said to Dwyer, "you can help, too. I'd like you to come back with us." Then he added in a fawning tone, "I told you back at the Red that our Company would treat you right. What are you going to do with the hundred pounds they gave you?"

So that was it! Bribery! I lay under the table boiling mad. At the same time, I was chafing, hidden

away as I was, for I wanted to get out of here, and be on my way home. I had heard enough to know that the Nor'Westers and the Hudson's Bay men were in for a real struggle for the rich fur trade of the west, and that our people would likely suffer as a result.

The three were walking towards the door, and I was just beginning to breathe a little easier when Dwyer said, "Bother! I left my case under the table after the big meeting. Wait a minute. I'll get it."

Frantically, I pawed underneath my chest. Then I realized sickeningly that it was Dwyer's case I had been lying on! I knew now he'd find me sure, so I banked on surprise to help me get away. My whole body was tense as his footsteps came closer.

He went down on his knees, pawing for the bag, and I had a fleeting glimpse of his startled face when he caught sight of me in the shadows. I swung the case with all my might and it caught him right under the chin. He was none too steady on his feet anyway, and over he went backwards, bawling at the top of his voice.

Macdonell and Cameron, who were waiting, didn't know what had happened, I guess, and luckily for me, they rushed to Dwyer's aid. All I could see was the open door leading into the Great Hall beyond.

I went through it like a scared rabbit. I can scarcely remember the next few seconds. My eyes flashed over the scene of the riotous feast, and I had a jumbled impression of food piled high on the tables, of weaving, shouting men and women. Curiously enough, the thing that stuck in my mind long after was the sight

of a huge voyageur, stripped to the waist, lifting another man off the floor with one hand as he exhibited his strength before an admiring group of friends.

Like a frightened deer, I flew down between the outside table and the wall. I was half way to the door that I knew led to the kitchen before the revellers realized that something was amiss. I heard shouts behind me.

"Stop that Indian! Get him!"

Some of the more sober started to clamber away from the tables. I dodged them. My breath was whistling in my teeth. I shot a glance over my shoulder. There were dozens of yelling men almost at my heels. Ahead another gang of them raced towards me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a skin window about three feet off the floor. It was a big one. I stopped, wheeled. With all the strength I could muster, I leaped straight at it.

A pistol ball screamed into the wall at my head as I jumped. The dry skin parted like paper and I lit in a heap outside, jarred to the bone because the window was six or seven feet above the ground.

I scrambled to my feet, and began to run for it. I heard someone else come out the window after me. Back in the banquet hall the roar of hundreds of throats was like the baying of a huge pack of hounds. I heard running feet. A door banged open in the darkness.

The streets were still filled with noisy groups of men and women. I could hear my pursuers as I dodged between the log buildings. I tripped once, sprawling my length on the grass, but I scrambled up and raced on—where?

I thought of the gates, but realized that would be the first place for which the Nor'Westers would head. Suddenly I knew where I was going. I crept along now, staying to the shadows. In a few minutes I was at the back door of Annette's place, knocking quietly but urgently on the slab frame. Behind me the whole village was coming to life. Half-breeds and traders were streaming down the streets, shouting, carrying flares that cast a lurid glow over the silent buildings round about.

Frantically I thumped the door. Someone inside shouted, "Who's there?" It was Annette's mother.

"It's me, Ronald Macmillan. Let me in. Quick!"

In a moment the door opened and I was in the Fraser cabin again. "I'm in trouble," I said breathlessly. "Don't show a light!"

Mrs. Fraser said, "Child! What's happened to you?"

I told her in a few words, and just as I finished we heard yells outside. She said coolly, "Under that bunk you go, Ronnie! Quick! Stay there until I tell you to come out."

The shouts and racket drew nearer, and my heart nearly stopped when somebody pounded on the door, demanding to know if Mrs. Fraser had seen a young Indian that night.

Truthfully she answered, "There's certainly no Indian here. Why do you ask?"

A thick voice replied. "An Indian got into some trouble back in the Great Hall. We've searched high and low, but I guess he got away."

I fell asleep soon after, my mind filled with frantic haste to get away from Fort William. When I awoke there was sunlight on the floor in front of my face.

"You'd better have something to eat, child," Mrs. Fraser said when I poked my head out cautiously from under the bunk. I didn't relish being called 'child' so much, but I certainly did like the porridge she gave me. I ate three big bowls of it. Annette watched me with wondering eyes, and when I grinned at her she smiled back. For some reason my heart began to sing in tune with the birds outside where they edged the roof, filling the bright morning with cheerful song.

After breakfast Annette said, "Where is Kat?"

"I don't know," I replied, "but he'll be around somewhere. I wish I could talk to him."

"You daren't leave this house," Mrs. Fraser put in.

"I know," I said helplessly, "but I can't stay here, either. No. I can't. I've got to get away from Fort William."

"I'll tell you what," Annette put in brightly, "I'll find Kat and ask him to come here tonight. Then you can both leave together in the darkness—over the wall at the back." She motioned to the rear of the cabin.

"Would you know Kat?" Mrs. Fraser said to her daughter.

"Certainly I'd know him," the girl answered.

"It's too risky, Annette," I burst out. "All those people . . ."

"Would it be all right, Mother?" she interrupted me as she turned to Mrs. Fraser.

The older woman's face was grave. "If you're careful, Annette, yes. Don't let anyone see you talking to Kat."

She went out. The hours dragged. She didn't get back until early afternoon. Mrs. Fraser and I were getting pretty worried, and Annette's mother was just going out to look for her when she walked in.

"I found him. He'll be here," she greeted us. I thought the day would never end, but it did, and a short while after dark I heard a cautious knock at the back door, and there was Kat. He came in. His eyes were sombre as he spoke.

"Girl tell me you here. She smart. Talk while she walk past me. Smart, much smart." He shook his head in admiration of Annette's coolness. She was sitting beside her mother, who looked up and smiled at Kat's words of praise. My Indian friend went on:

"You in fix, Ron-ee. All traders look for you. Nor'-Westers all over. What you do? Kill?"

I shook my head and grinned. "No. But I heard all they had to say at their meeting. And they know I heard, too. I guess they want to make sure I don't get away."

"We go tonight. Now," Kat said with finality. "No like it here. Too many people."

Mrs. Fraser packed up some food, warning me a dozen times to be careful, and to tell the Colbys she would try to persuade Robert to go west when he returned. Annette stood by shyly, watching me. Kat and I thanked these two friendly people again, and then we slipped outside.

It was black dark, and quiet. Mrs. Fraser had given us a long, tough strip of hide, which we looped at one end. We threw it over one of the sharp pickets, shinnied silently up the logs, then lowered ourselves down the outside of the palisade. We didn't make a sound.

Big bonfires blazed across the clearing. We gave them a wide berth, bending low and heading straight for the bush, and in the direction of where we had hidden our canoe. We barely made the trees before the moon came out from behind thick clouds. It was bright moonlight when we caught sight of the glistening Kaministikwia River.

I peered ahead, strangely uneasy as we neared the place where we had cached our canoe. My weeks on the trail, and the days of danger I had lived through, somehow had sharpened my senses until I began to feel an inward caution and alertness which must have been very much like Kat's native ability to sense danger.

We were quite a few yards from the bushes where our craft was concealed, when I noticed an ever-so-slight movement among the criss-crossed moonlight and shadows that lay in splotches ahead of us. I touched Kat's arm. He stopped. We hadn't made a sound.

I put my lips to his ear. "There's something in the bush ahead. Just off to the right, there."

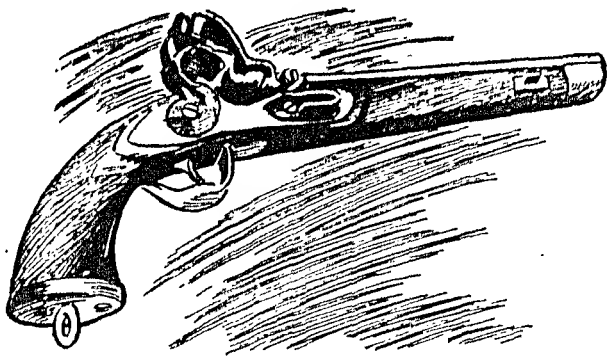
Kat grunted softly in confirmation. I went on, "Wait, I'll see what it is."

I crept forward. On top of a little knoll I stopped, and my fingers closed around a small rock. I heaved it as hard as I could, flinging it well beyond where we

had hidden our canoe and towards the river. It cleared the trees and fell with a sudden clatter on the bank. I threw two more in quick succession.

Then a black shadow moved, quietly, stealthily towards the spot where my missiles had landed. I inched ahead, and there, in a bright patch of moonlight, I saw that it was a white man. I risked a few steps towards the spot where we had concealed our canoe.

My heart skipped a beat. Our craft was gone!



Chapter Ten

CAPTURED AGAIN

As I edged back towards Kat, the hair on my neck stiffened. I sensed that Cameron was at the bottom of this affair. When I reached my companion who stood in a black shadow, I said, "Kat! Our canoe's gone! There's a white man on guard there."

Good old Kat. He just said, "You no worry, Ron-ee. Come, we go my people."

We were pretty careful, I can tell you, as we made our way back through the tousie brush towards the clearing. I half expected to see a fierce Nor'Wester jump out of every irregular splotch of moon-shadow we passed. When we approached the Ojibwa encampment, Kat said, "Me go ahead this time. You wait."

He disappeared, while I crawled well into the thick branches of a spruce tree and lay quiet. But my mind

wasn't quiet. I felt sure now that Cameron wasn't going to let me get away if he could prevent it.

Because I was disguised as an Indian, he couldn't know I was white, much less one of the colonists themselves. But he must have been shrewd enough to realize that anybody who would risk hiding in the inner meeting room of the Nor'Westers must have had a serious purpose in taking such a chance, whether Indian, white, or any other colour.

I was trying to figure out how the Nor'Westers had found our canoe, when I heard a low whistle, and there was Kat. His voice was urgent as he spoke:

"Traders after you, all right. Ona-bedac, our guide, him see men look up river, down river. They find our canoe. They take away. Man come back. Wait where we hid canoe. Ona-bedac in our camp now. My people tell me, 'whole fort look for Indian who run out of Great Hall.' That you! Cameron, him say he give much money to man who catch you. We in plenty trouble, eh?"

A price on my head! And I'd only been in Fort William a few hours. I shivered. "Your people . . ." I started, and then I felt sorry I'd said that, for I knew that Kat's Ojibwa friends wouldn't give me away.

Kat went on, "Traders search tepees two, three times already. No safe to go my people. Ona-bedac say our canoe, all canoes, in fort. We steal one, maybe. We no get one, I make one. You no worry."

Suddenly I thought of Annette and her mother again. It was just possible that they might know where

we could get a canoe and be on our way. I knew Kat could make one all right, but that would take a couple of weeks, and we'd have to go a long way into the bush to be safe. We'd need food, too, and shelter, and getting those essentials would take valuable time. I wanted to get away from Fort William, and I was willing to risk a lot to do so.

"Listen, Kat," I told my friend, "the Frasers might know where we could get a canoe. It's worth a try. You stay here. I'll go back. Have you the hide thong?"

Kat grunted. "Me come too. I have hide. Me come, Ron-ee. Yes."

There was no holding Kat back. We picked our way through the big gardens and around to the spot where we had clambered over the stockade a short time before. I knew the place because I had noticed a stake which was much lighter in colour than the others around it. It didn't take long to toss the looped thong over a picket and ease our way inside.

My heart was pounding, for the moon was still bright and every second I was expecting the lookout man on the bastion at the far corner of the fort to shout an alarm. But he didn't see us.

In a few minutes we were once more down in the space between the palisades and the wall of the Fraser cabin. We knocked carefully on the door. When Mrs. Fraser opened it, her lips parted in surprise.

"Child! What's happened? Come in. Quick."

I told her of our predicament. Annette was awake now, too, and had come out into the main room of

the cabin. Her hair was tousled and her eyes sleepy, but I thought she looked more attractive than ever, standing there in the dim candlelight. When I had finished speaking, Mrs. Fraser said, "You'll have to find a canoe some place."

I said, "Do you know where we might get one?"

"Annette has one, but it's in the canoe loft down at the wharf . . . I wonder . . ." Her eyes brightened. Annette broke in.

"Mother! I have just the idea! I'll paddle up the river tomorrow and hide my canoe well away from the fort. Then Ronald and Kat can pick it up. The traders will never suspect me."

Mrs. Fraser looked at her daughter and frowned. "But how will you get back?"

"Walk."

"What if the Nor'Westers start asking questions?"

"They won't see me," Annette replied pertly.

"Do you know what would happen if they found that we were helping these boys?"

"Yes, Father would probably lose his trading rights with the North-West Company. And they'd send us all back to Montreal, likely."

Mrs. Fraser's eyes flashed for a moment.

"I think your father would want us to do as we are doing," she said quietly. "I'm glad you came back, Ronald," she went on warmly. "I think Annette can help."

It didn't take long to make our plans. We were to get back over the wall as fast as we could, and go up

the Kaministikwia to a spot well beyond where our canoe had been hidden. There the river made a wide bend, creating a back wash of quiet water on this side of the stream. Tomorrow morning, Annette would paddle up to that baylet, run the canoe into the bank, and then hurry back to the clearing around the fort. Mrs. Fraser's garden plot happened to be close to the bush, and Annette would slip out of the brush, start weeding for a while and then casually walk back to the fort. Then we'd wait until dark and make our escape up river.

Again we clambered over the palisade. The moon had waned, but it was still light enough to see where we were going. As we crawled away from the walls on our bellies, I could make out the moving black shadows which were the sentinels in the tall bastion of Fort William. We slowly wormed our way across the fields and into the bush.

We followed the ragged edge of trees until we came to the Kaministikwia above the fort, then struck up-river. Long before we neared the spot where our canoe had been hidden, we turned inland, skirting the hide-away where that Nor'Wester awaited our unsuspecting return. Thank heaven we had hidden our supplies well away from the place. We found them after a great deal of trouble, because one piece of bush looks much like another, particularly at night.

Kat and I made three silent trips to our cache before we had the last of our necessities piled in a glade near the back wash where Annette was to leave the canoe.

I was so tired I could hardly keep my eyes open. We took a couple of buffalo robes from our packs and spread them out in a sheltered clump of alders, and I was asleep before I realized it.

The next thing I knew, Kat was shaking me quietly and saying, "Sun up long time. We go river now." I shook the sleep out of my eyes. We made our way cautiously to the water, where I had a good dousing in the cold Kaministikwia. Then we went back into the thick brush near the bank and waited. While we were there a merry, shouting fur brigade went down the stream, headed for the fort and the revelry which awaited the voyageurs in the Great Hall. Their canoes were laden with bales. The men were singing French voyageur songs, and I could hear their words floating across the sunlit, sparkling water.

"*En roulant, ma boule, roulant*" went the happy song, sung in time with the swift slap of the paddles. Before they were out of sight I could hear them singing, "*Trois canards s'en vont baignant.*"

Their voices faded, died away. We waited. My eyes were glued to the wooded point down river around which Annette must first appear if she was to arrive at our rendezvous as we had planned. A tingle ran through my body when I saw a canoe push its nose out from the point and head towards us. I strained forward, peering intently to make sure that it was she. But a chill ran up my spine when I saw another canoe behind, following at a leisurely pace as the first craft made its way towards us.



*... in a moment she was running to our
hiding place.*

It was Annette in the front one all right, but the canoe behind held two rough-looking specimens who were shouting and laughing. I recognized their words as half Indian, half French and realized they were Métis who had followed Annette as she went up river.

I choked at the thought that the traders had somehow suspected the girl, but there was nothing I could do about it now. She was directly in front of us, and I could see the look of alarm in her face as she ran the nose of the canoe into the mud, scrambled to the bow, and out on the bank. She looked around wildly, and I knew what a risk she had taken to start out alone the morning following the feast in the Great Hall, with almost all the men in the fort still carousing after their wild revel of the night before.

I grasped Kat's arm. He looked at me and his eyes narrowed. He whistled a long, low cadence, and Annette's head swung sharply in our direction. The canoe with the half-breeds was still some distance down the bank, and I could hear them laughing and shouting coarsely. I popped out and beckoned the girl, and in a moment she was running to our hiding place.

Her eyes showed terror, and her breath came in gasps as she seized my sleeve.

"Ronald! Those men—they followed me . . ."

A pent up sob shook her. She was still clinging to me. I shot a glance at Kat. His eyes were glued to the river where the tipsy half-breeds were approaching.

"Annette," I said softly, "you're the bravest girl in the whole world. I'll never be able to repay you for

the risk you've taken to help us. Now, look. Get on home as fast as you can. You'll be all right. Don't worry about these men. We'll look after them. Please hurry. And thank your mother for us again."

She gathered her shawl about her shoulders and lifted the edge of her long skirts as she took a few quick steps back down the trail we had come. I was watching her. Suddenly she wheeled and, back at my side, she said, "We'll be out to the Red. I know Father will take us. You'll be there, Ronald. I . . ."

I felt the soft, warm touch of her lips on my cheek, and then she was gone, fading into the greenery, while I stood there flushed and amazed at the realization that I wanted Annette to go to our colony more than anything else I could think of. It seemed incredible that she should disappear out of my life, and I just stared at the spot in the leaves where she had gone. Kat brought me back to reality with an urgent nudge.

"Men come. This bad. They go back, your girl maybe get hurt when men tell traders she help us. We better kill."

I gasped. Kat went on: "You man now, Ron-ee. You got knife?"

"Kat, we can't . . ."

"These men, they bad. They catch us, they kill us, maybe. Look . . ."

The men were weaving up the bank before us, shouting all sorts of foul invectives at Annette, not knowing that she was already on her way back to the fort. A sudden coldness came over me, like a dash of icy water.

I knew Kat was right. But I still couldn't bring myself about to hurl my knife into the body of one of these unsuspecting men who stumbled towards us.

Kat had slipped his long knife out of its sheath. It shone wickedly in the sun. The men were closer. I grasped his arm.

"Kat, wait! Get in their way and see if you can find out if Cameron sent them. They may just be following Annette. I'll hide. If they don't know who she is, we can knock them out and be on our way. Hurry . . ."

Kat grinned, slipped his knife back. I ducked into the brush, picking up a short, heavy stick as I moved. The men crashed through the bush towards us. They drew up when they saw Kat. I wasn't three feet from them, concealed in the undergrowth. They stood there, weaving on their feet as Kat asked, "You look for somebody?"

They answered in Indian dialect. For a few moments the three conversed, then Kat said meaningly, and I'm quite sure for my benefit, "You no know girl, why you follow?"

I knew they weren't Cameron's men, then. They had just trailed Annette like a couple of animals. I grasped the stick I had picked up, stepped quietly behind them and swung. The man ahead of me went down like a felled ox. The other fellow wheeled around in startled alarm, and the next thing I knew the stick Kat carried broke over the man's head and the half-breed collapsed in a limp heap beside his companion.

Kat grinned, but his eyes were cold. "Me tie up with legs," he muttered. We lugged the inert figures to two nearby poplars where Kat slipped their feet around the trunks, securing them with that queer Indian lock which effectively tied them to the trees with their own legs.

"That fix them," he said gruffly.

I nodded. It fixed us in a way, too. When those Métis came around their shouts would probably be heard for miles. We certainly couldn't stay in this spot quietly for the rest of the day, then slip up the Kaministikwia in the dark as we had planned. Nor could we safely show ourselves on the river now in broad daylight. That would be inviting capture.

There was nothing else for it but to hide Annette's canoe as far away from this place as we could get, and then move our supplies, too. I realized that I hadn't handled this affair any too cleverly. Maybe Kat, Annette, and I should have concealed ourselves in the undergrowth and allowed the two Métis to wander around looking for her until they got tired. They'd have probably gone on their way before long. Maybe...

"Kat," I said hurriedly, "we've got to get those two canoes out of sight. Come on."

We went cautiously down to the river's edge. I piled a lot of big rocks in the half-breeds' craft, slashed the birch bark bottom with my knife and sank the canoe in six feet of water. Then we took Annette's canoe and carried it away back in the bush, hiding it in a thick clump of spruce, and stacking branches

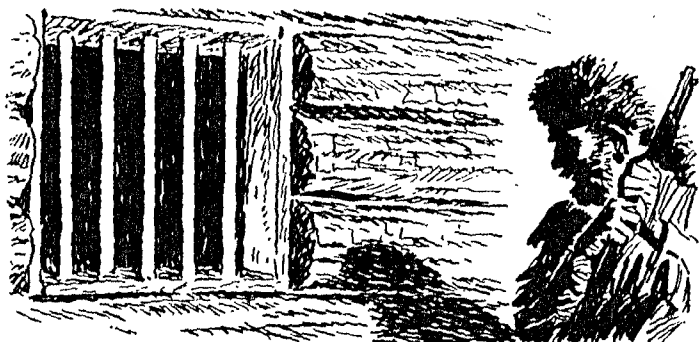
around it. I felt sure it would be safe until we needed it that night.

"Now let's get back and move our supplies here, too," I suggested.

Kat grunted. "We better hurry. Traders come, maybe."

When we reached the river's edge again, the two Métis were still slumped around their trees, motionless. We didn't waste any time. I had just hoisted a heavy pack to my shoulders and Kat had gathered up our bed roll, when a huge man in buckskins stepped out of the foliage.

His hand held a pistol, and it pointed squarely at my stomach!



Chapter Eleven

IMPRISONED

"DROP THOSE packs! Turn around!" The man's voice was a low growl.

I eased my load to the ground and faced him. His eyes widened. "What are you doing with those supplies? What was all the yelling about here a while ago? Say . . . would you be the one Cameron's after?" he ejaculated. His face hardened. "Come on, you two. Back to the fort you go. There's something going on here I don't like."

My heart sank as he walked towards us. I thought sure he'd notice the two Métis lying a short distance away, but he didn't see them. I dared not open my mouth for fear he'd discover at once that I wasn't an Indian. Kat spoke.

"Why you want us?"

"The fort's after a brave who's got into trouble a couple of nights ago at the Great Hall. We've gathered in a dozen young bucks, but we haven't found the right one yet. Come on. No more questions."

He motioned us back down the trail to the fort. A wild idea of bolting flashed through my mind, but the man was too close. He walked right behind us. His gun wasn't a foot from my back. It was a sickening feeling to be forced to return to Fort William at pistol point. We came out of the bush and into the fields. I saw the lone figure of a young girl bent over a patch of vegetables, weeding. It was Annette. She'd followed her plan to the letter.

As we passed close to her, she straightened. Her hand flew to her mouth in surprise at the sight of us, but she didn't give any indication that she knew us. I was thankful then that we had hidden her canoe. If we had left it on the bank, the traders would have found it for sure, and then she'd be in trouble, too.

People stared at us curiously as we came up to the gates. We were marched to the Great Hall, up the wide steps to the veranda, and inside. There was a small office just to the right of the door. Our captor knocked. The door opened. Cameron stepped out. He peered at us. A look of surprise filled his face, and a gleam of triumph flashed in his eyes. He let out a yell.

"That's the one! There!" He pointed at me. "So we've got him at last!" He was thoroughly excited now. "Call Dwyer! And Alex Macdonell! We'll soon get to the bottom of all this!" He stepped towards me,

grabbing me by the scruff of the neck. "Get in there, you! And you, too!" He gave Kat a shove, pushing us roughly inside the small room.

"Where did you find them?" he asked the man who had caught us.

"I was posted at the spot where we found that hidden canoe," the big fellow replied. "I heard a lot of hollering up the river and went to see what was going on. These two were lugging supplies back from the bank."

"Did they have a canoe?" Cameron asked sharply.

My heart skipped a beat. "None that I saw," was the reply.

I knew then what had happened. The yells of those drunken Métis had reached the ears of this man who had been waiting down river at the spot where we'd first hidden our canoe, and he'd come up to find out what all the noise was about.

Tom Dwyer and Alexander Macdonell came into the room a few minutes later. They were breathless and excited.

"We've got him!" Cameron greeted them, "And another Indian who was helping him."

They faced me. "Why were you hiding in the meeting room?" Cameron asked.

I shook my head. I could feel the sweat running down my armpits. I knew they still thought I was an Indian.

"Answer me! Quick!" He lunged at me, seizing my jacket at the neck and shaking me hard. I jerked away from him. I heard a rip as the seams of my shirt gave

away, exposing my white shoulders! Cameron gasped. Dwyer yelled, "He's white! Look at his skin!"

Cameron ripped off my headband, peering at me closely. Then his mouth fell open.

"You're Macmillan!" he croaked.

There was no point in keeping quiet now. "Aye, Cameron, I'm Macmillan all right."

They were so surprised they just stood there for a few seconds staring at me. Then Cameron spoke.

"How did you get here? How did you get away from us on the river that night? Who is this?" He pointed to Kat.

For the next half hour I was grilled with question after question, about how I got into the Great Hall, who had helped me, had I told anybody else about what I'd heard in the meeting room? They threatened all sorts of dire things if I didn't tell them all I knew.

I didn't, though. The thing I was most afraid of was betraying Kat and his friendly people who lived near the fort. When Dwyer said, "I'll get a blacksnake whip, and maybe a few lashes with that will loosen your tongue," Kat spoke up for the first time, and incriminated himself, but not his tribe.

"Me get Ron-ee away from you on river. My canoe bring him to Fort William. Me get him into Big Room. Me like Ron-ee. Me from Red."

Finally Cameron said, "So you thought you'd get back to your gardener friends on the Red and put them on their guard. Well, you won't. Nor your Indian friend here, either."

He called in a man with a musket, and Kat and I were marched away, down the steps, and across the fort grounds. We stopped at a long, low building with iron bars on the single window.

I've never felt so utterly discouraged as I did when that Nor'Wester locked up Kat and me in the fort gaol. The door clanged shut, and I heard the bolt slam into place. There was no one else in the room—just the two of us. A few stools lay scattered around on the earthen floor, and a rude table leaned against a broken-down bunk at the far end. I sat down.

Kat said, "Well, they catch us. We no go home, now, eh?"

I shook my head. "Not for a while, anyway."

It *was* a while—quite a while. The next morning the door opened and the guard poked his head in.

"Come on, you two. Down you go to the canoe loft and to work. We don't pamper our prisoners here." He tossed us a couple of flaming red shirts. "Put these on first, and keep them on. They'll make it easy for us to keep an eye on you."

An hour later, Kat and I were busy repairing a big voyageur canoe that had been ripped on a river-boulder. Our bright red prison shirts made us so conspicuous that we gave up the idea of getting away—for the present at least. That afternoon, Cameron, Dwyer, and Macdonell left for the West. Somebody found the half-breeds we'd locked to those trees, but the Métis didn't remember much about what had happened to them—thank goodness for that!

The days wore on while we were put to work at every conceivable job around the fort—under the watchful eye of the prison-master, of course. I learned a lot, even though I did worry and fret about our imprisonment. Before long I could patch a canoe with birch bark and pitch just as expertly as any man in the place. I worked with a crew of Indians, building new canoes. Then I was given the job of moulding lead shot. I spent weeks on the fur press, stacking pelts into the heavy frame, twisting the big screw which compressed the fur into small, easily-handled bales for shipment to Montreal.

It wasn't bad while we were working, but when night came and we were locked up, our imprisonment became almost unbearable. I would sit and worry about my family, and about the rest of the colony, and I'd try to imagine what was going on at the Settlement. In my mind's eye I would picture all sorts of dire things happening out there, and then I would blame myself for getting caught, when I might have reached them if I'd used my head a little more.

Kat would listen to me by the hour as I talked about our predicament. More than once he told me, "You no worry, Ron-ee. We no get away long time, me think. You get sick if you no stop bother."

It was a long time before I resigned myself to the fact that I couldn't do a thing about my capture, but after a couple of months I pretty well accepted Kat's stolid reasoning that we'd never be able to get word to the Settlement in time to do any good.

When the snow came, vigilance over us was relaxed a little, but we were still locked up at night. I used to listen to the wild revels in the Great Hall, and wonder when I would ever get away from Fort William. The winter passed quickly enough, because Kat and I were kept busy. I saw Annette several times—at a distance of course, because she couldn't very well mix in with the work gangs, and our guard saw that we didn't talk to anybody as we tramped to our meals and to the guard house to sleep. We weren't treated too badly, though. Our food was plentiful and good, and we were given warm clothes when the winter came.

One day when the water was running in rivulets down the spring icicles on the cabin eaves, a tall figure limped into the canoe loft where Kat and I toiled at a craft which had been smashed up-river. We were fitting a new bow to her, and I didn't notice the man close by as I struggled to hold a springy thwart in place while Kat laced it firm.

The stranger was almost at my elbow when I heard the clatter of the knife he dropped on the floor. He stopped, leaned down to pick it up, and the next minute my heart was pounding with excitement for the first time in months.

"I'm Robert Fraser," he said in a low voice. "Annette's told me about you. We're going to try and help you. Keep your spirits up!"

Then he was gone, but his words spun around in my head like peas in a poke. I'd been wondering if we'd ever get away from the Nor'Westers, and it was grand

to know that someone besides ourselves was trying to help.

It was on a Monday in May, 1815, before Robert Fraser was able to keep his promise. The spring sun had set and dusk was already shrouding the buildings. Kat and I had been locked up for the night. Suddenly the dreaded word of the fort-dwellers rang across the compound.

"Fire! The bunk house! Fire! Fire!"

I jumped from my stool, and pressed my face against the bars at the window of our prison. A faint glow wavered, then brightened the sky at the far end of the fort. Streams of excited men raced past with pails and buckets. I could hear the rising roar of the flames now as they bit into the tinder-dry logs of a building away off somewhere at the other side of the fort.

Suddenly a girl appeared. It was Annette! Her lips were parted, and her flashing eyes were filled with excitement.

"Ronnie! Get ready! Father will have the door open in a minute. Your guard's gone to the fire. Here, take this . . ." The words spilled from her mouth as she hurriedly stuffed a long, thin strand of batiche thong through the bars and into my shaking hands. "Listen," she went on, "Two of Kat's people are outside the walls, just opposite the magazine. Go over the pickets there." She stopped, then suddenly pressed her face against my cheek. "We're going to the Red with a brigade that's leaving in the morning. Please God you get there safely, too."

Then she was gone. I didn't even get time to thank her. Kat was hanging over my shoulder. "Somebody at door," he gurgled. "Ron-ee! Ron-ee! Door open!"

We yanked off our red prison shirts. I clawed at our dusty old buckskins which hung on a wooden peg. Then we were out. There was no one near, but I caught a glimpse of a tall, limping figure and a girl hurrying down the rough street. There wasn't anybody else in sight.

I could hear the yells of the men fighting the fire as we ran swiftly past the big, stone magazine, and reached the walls. I looped the thong, tossed it over one of the pickets, and shinnied up like a scared monkey, easing myself over the palisade. I hung by my fingers before I dropped to the earth below. Kat was in a heap beside me before I could scramble to my feet.

Two dusky figures disengaged themselves from the shadow of the walls. They were two strapping Ojibwa braves from Kat's tribal encampment. One of them muttered a few words to my companion. Kat said, "Hurry, Ron-ee! We go far now."

We all ran across the fields towards the bush. Our guides were taking a trail which led *away* from the Kaministikwia! I wondered about that, because the river was our logical avenue of escape to the West. I didn't say anything, however. We scurried along most of the night, stumbling over deadfalls, wading shallow creeks up which we would walk in water to our knees before striking inland again. I had no idea of where I was, or where I was going.

I didn't talk. We made our way through the dark forest swiftly and quietly. I thought my legs were going to fold up under me when one of the Indians spoke to Kat, and my companion in turn said to me, "We rest now. Just little while."

I flopped down, rubbing my aching calves. Kat stretched out beside me. Our escape had taken place so quickly that I hadn't had time even to try to figure out how Robert Fraser had engineered it. But he hadn't overlooked a thing. I had a feeling that that fire didn't just start by itself, because it was the confusion it created that had covered our escape.

Kat had been jabbering away to one of our stolid Indian guides. When the man stopped I spoke to my friend.

"What did he say, Kat?"

"Him tell me where we go. Annette's father fix with my people to get us away when he get us out of fort."

"Where are we going then?" I repeated.

Kat grinned in the early dawn, his tired, brown face grimy and sweat-covered.

"My people carry canoes, supplies, to little lake many miles in bush. That last week. We go there now. Traders think we go back west on river with short bends and many islands." I knew that was the Indian way of saying 'Kaministiquia.' Kat went on: "We go 'nother way. Longer. Little rivers. Plenty lakes. We fool them. Good, eh?"

I was still thinking how good it was to be free again when I fell asleep. The last thing I thought of was that

this was the day on which Annette and her family would start west. They'd likely get there ahead of us.

We slept a few hours and were well on our way again before mid-morning. Three days later we reached a cache where our Indian friends proudly pulled two well-stocked canoes from a hiding place in the brush. We were on a little, unnamed lake, far to the west and north of Fort William.

"Tomorrow my friends start with us to Rainy Lake," Kat told me. "Long trip. Hard, too. They come back. We find way after that. We safe now."

It must have been well past the middle of May when the four of us started south and west, two in each canoe, working our way through the myriad lakes and streams which patterned the glorious forest like silvery, shining threads.

How those Indians ever found their way through that maze of waterways was beyond my understanding. Our progress was slow, but steady. I climbed over back-breaking portages; spent long, hard hours poling and tracking up rapids. We skimmed across crystal clear lakes teeming with fish, and paddled up feathery, bright streams.

Unerringly our two Indian guides led us across the wilderness until one hazy evening we portaged over a high hill, and there below us was a great body of water which stretched away until the horizon met its mirror-smooth surface in the misty distance.

It was so large that a sudden, frightening possibility struck me. Had our guides somehow lost their way?

Our passage through the forest had *seemed* aimless enough. I grabbed Kat's arm.

"Good heavens, Kat! Surely we're not back on Lake Superior again . . . !"

Kat grinned. "No. This Rainy Lake. Us back on traders' trail now. Us have to be careful."



Chapter Twelve

RETURN TO THE RED

OUR GUIDES solemnly bade us good-bye and turned back. Kat and I were on the broad waters of Rainy Lake in another hour, paddling close to shore and keeping a sharp eye for any other canoes, for as Kat had said, we were now on the route of the fur traders and it was quite probable that every Nor'West brigade on the trail would be on the lookout for us.

The first night we camped well back from the shore, in the bush. Kat disappeared for a while, returning in a short time with an armful of bark and some berries, which he put in a pot over our little fire. The vessel boiled away for hours. Then he set it aside to cool.

"What are you doing, Kat?" I asked him.

"I make colour. You put on face. You look like Indian then." The next morning I rubbed the stain

on my face and hands. Kat gave me a new buckskin shirt which he had hauled out of the pack we carried. Surprisingly to me, my old one was tight, far too tight. I certainly had grown during the winter—both in height and in weight. When we set out for our second day on Rainy Lake, I had once more been transformed into an Ojibwa brave, but it didn't seem quite so thrilling to assume this disguise now. I didn't grin or smile as I had back in Kat's home encampment when I had first donned buckskins. I guess I was growing up and didn't realize it.

—We crossed Rainy Lake, went down Rainy River into Lake of the Woods and made our way up river, lake, and portage to the rushing headwaters of the Winnipeg River. It was the middle of June, 1815, when we slipped past the Nor'West post of Bas-de-la-Rivière at the mouth of the Winnipeg River, and entered the Lake. We'd had a good trip in many ways. We had lived mostly off the forest, and fish was our mainstay for food. But we did carry some smoked meat, tea, flour, salt, and sugar which our Fort William Indian friends had stowed in our canoe.

At night when we rolled up in our blankets I would look up at the star-dotted sky and listen to the crackling embers of the dying fire. Sometimes Kat and I would sit around the blaze, talking of our adventures at Fort William. Often we baked our fish in clay, just as we had done so many times back on the Red.

The morning after we'd passed Bas-de-la-Rivière we got under way at daylight. My mind was filled with

excitement at the prospects of seeing my family again as we paddled south along the east shore of Lake Winnipeg. Suddenly Kat, who was in the bow, laid his paddle across the thwarts and peered intently ahead. Instinctively my eyes followed his gaze.

Several black dots spotted the water far down the lake. These could be nothing else than boats or canoes, and there were a lot of them. My first impulse was to swing to shore and hide. Then I remembered my Indian get-up and said to Kat, "Whoever they are, they won't recognize us. Let's go and meet them."

Kat nodded in agreement, and in a moment we were away again, paddles dipping in unison as we sped towards the oncoming flotilla. It wasn't long before I could see that the craft were canoes—twelve or fifteen of them, big, broad-beamed craft laden with people and supplies.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw several faces that I knew staring at us across the water. These were our own colonists!

"Let's find out where they're going," I cried to Kat. "Come on. Swing over. Maybe we can . . ."

My voice froze in my throat as the lead canoe came closer and closer, for there in the centre, gazing idly across the water, was Duncan Cameron himself!

I swung our canoe with a savage twist of the paddle, hunching down, my heart pounding against my ribs. I half expected a musket ball to come whizzing across at me, but I guess my increased stature fooled him, because he didn't recognize me, nor Kat either.

I chanced a sidewise glance at his canoe, and my amazement grew. Seated behind the Nor'West wintering partner was Miles Macdonell, our Governor, thongs on his wrists, dejectedly slumped over! He didn't even glance at us as we waited. The lead canoe drew abreast of us, passed. Cameron's words of last year flashed across my mind—"Of course, Macdonell will be charged with theft . . ."

I decided to chance it. I couldn't sit by any longer without trying to find out what had happened.

Kat looked at me as I dipped my paddle. "Your people," he said slowly. "They go east."

"I know. I know," I replied hurriedly. "Pull around, Kat, and slide our canoe alongside the last of the brigade. We'll see if we can find out anything."

"Yöu be careful," Kat warned.

He dug his paddle in. We drew near the last canoe, swung, and travelled along with it for a piece. I almost blurted out in English, I was so excited, but I remembered in time that I was an 'Indian' to the people in the big canoe.

"Where you go? You from colony? Why you leave?" I asked gruffly in imitation of Kat's meagre English.

A tall, raw-boned Scot by the name of Telfer answered me. I had known him slightly at the Settlement, but he had no idea he was talking to one of his own kind. He guffawed.

"We're going to Upper Canada with Cameron," he replied. "I'm through with that starving colony."

My heart sank as I recalled Cameron's words in the candle-lit meeting room back at Fort William, almost a year ago. My mind was filled with fear for my own family as I asked, "Other settlers stay on Red?"

"Forty or fifty stayed there, I guess. If they want to fight it out, they can. I'd rather have my bairns away from the place."

I could feel the excitement rising in my body. "Traders fight? They kill?"

"Nobody's killed yet, but it won't be long. The half-breeds are on the war path. They certainly mauled some of our people. The way they treated Wallie Macmillan was a shame."

"Wallie Macmillan!" My brother's name crackled from my mouth like a pistol shot.

I thought surely the man would notice my agitation. He looked at me queerly. I pushed my concern back in my mind, and went on as quietly as I could, trying to find out what had happened to Wallie.

"Him my friend. What they do with him?" I mumbled.

Telfer shrugged. "He may be your friend, but that didn't stop the Métis from pounding him almost senseless." He stopped and peered at me closely. "Haven't I talked to you before somewhere? What . . ."

"Maybe," I countered hurriedly. "Me live around colony. Me Ojibwa." I couldn't risk being recognized any longer so I said, "Bye."

We had paddled alongside the last canoe of the slow-moving flotilla for quite a few minutes. Now we

swung sharply back. Kat, in the bow, increased the beat of his paddle strokes until we fairly flew along, and I kept up with him in the stern, stroke for stroke.

Wallie's plight filled my mind. Had the Métis hurt him badly? I began to fret about Father and Mother, too, and as the miles slipped past my agitation increased.

It was early morning a day later when we rounded the last bend in the Red before Point Douglas, and the colony crept into sight. We veered over to the shore at the foot of my father's plot of ground.

I guided the canoe into a backwash of quiet water. I clambered out and raced up the bank, not even waiting for Kat. When I came to the flat land atop the rise, I was running as fast as my legs could carry me. A cold, numbing chill froze my heart when I burst out from a clump of familiar bushes and stared towards our cabin.

Nothing but a still-smouldering pile of ashes lay in front of me!



Chapter Thirteen

TROUBLE ON THE PRAIRIES

MY THROAT clogged with a half sob that I couldn't hold back. There was no sign of anybody around. I shot a glance towards the Colby house on the next plot. It was still standing, a friendly wisp of smoke curling up from its stone chimney. They'd know what had happened!

Pounding, leaping bounds carried me frantically to its door. I didn't even wait to knock. The wooden latch snapped under my flying weight. I almost knocked over the slight figure who was just carrying a dish from the spit to the table. It was Annette!

It isn't any wonder that she screamed and let the dish she was carrying clatter to the floor. Father popped out of the door leading to the back room. His musket was at the ready. There was fire in his eyes.

I might have been shot, the way I acted, but I still hadn't realized how the half-breeds had been bothering the colonists, nor that more than one cabin had been rushed by half-drunken Bois-Brûlés in just this manner.

Annette recognized me first. "It's Ronnie! Oh! It's Ronnie!" she cried. Father's eyes almost popped out of his head. Then he had his arms around my shoulders, and I don't mind admitting the tears of gladness which clouded my own eyes.

"Father! Father!" I choked. He held me off.

"Aye! It's Ronnie all right! Mother! Mrs. Colby! Mrs. Fraser! Ronnie's home!"

His shouts brought all of them running, and I was surrounded by my family and my friends. Mrs. Fraser of Fort William was among them. I couldn't think straight for a while, I was so glad to see my parents again. Father looked my Indian outfit up and down, grinning delightedly. Mother's eyes were shining unnaturally. Annette had recovered from her sudden fright at my noisy entry and stood by shyly looking at me. Kat came in just then.

"Wallie . . . our house . . ." I began.

Father's face tightened, "They tried to take Wallie prisoner . . ."

"Then they didn't get him!" I cried in relief.

"No. He got away. Robert Fraser did his best to help him. He had to hide, too."

"Where are they?"

"In old Katchebewan's camp across the river."

"The half-breeds don't know that?"

"I suppose not."

I felt a lot easier now that I knew that Wallie and Robert Fraser were safe.

"What happened to our house?" I continued.

"The Métis set fire to it while we fought them. Look . . ." He rolled up his sleeve. An angry blue welt ran the length of his forearm. "They didn't bother taking me," he concluded.

A white hate swept over me like a sheet of flame. So this was the way the traders were going about saving their fur empire! I recalled the words of Cameron back in the meeting room at Fort William. The 'details' they had planned to work out on their way back west had certainly been disastrous ones for us.

I looked at Annette. She seemed to be almost a young woman now, and I felt strangely self-conscious as I spoke to her.

"Annette, how did you and your father get Kat and me out of the gaol back at Fort William? Did you leave for the Red the next morning as you told me you would? Where . . ."

Annette smiled. "Father arranged it," she said, and her voice was sweet and mellow. "That fire didn't just happen. He set it. Then he forced the gaol lock after telling the guard to get to the blaze. He'd talked to Kat's people weeks before."

"And you helped, too," I said gratefully. "I'll never be able to repay you."

I looked around quickly as I realized that all the older folk in the room were gazing at us with satisfied,

knowing grins on their faces, and suddenly I became tongue-tied. Father spoke:

"Lad, I'm not so sure about that. You may, some day."

My berry-stained face, I know, must have been about two shades redder as I said to him, "Father, stop your teasing, and tell me what's taken place since Cameron returned to the Red last fall."

His face became grave again. "We've had bad times here on the prairies, lad. The first thing the Nor' Westers did was arrest John Spencer for his part in the Souris raid. That was before Cameron got back. He wasn't here a week before he started to treat us so well that a lot of our people began to think he really wanted us to stay. It was then he began to give us trouble."

I listened while Father told me how Cameron had tried to scare our settlers with tales of coming Indian raids, and how he did all sorts of things to upset the colonists. Before long he'd swung several over to the side of the Nor' Westers, but not enough for his purpose.

"I guess he saw that he'd have to do something drastic," Father continued wearily, "so about eight weeks ago he stole our swivel guns, thanks to George Campbell, the black heart! Campbell helped him."

I recalled Campbell as one of the settlers who was forever complaining about everybody and everything. Father went on:

"The next thing a band of Métis marched on Governor Macdonell's house and attacked it. They almost killed Surgeon White and John Bourke, but our

men fought them off. Four of our folks were wounded in the fracas."

"We felt that the trouble was just beginning. We were right. Then Cameron said he only wanted Miles Macdonell, and he promised faithfully that he wouldn't molest us any more if our Governor gave himself up."

"You know the high principle of Macdonell, Ronnie? He surrendered himself to those miserable traders just to save us, and after he did that Cameron turned on us, and ordered us out of the colony. About two-thirds of our people accepted his offer to go to Upper Canada. They left four days ago."

"We met them on the lake. Macdonell was with them," I volunteered. Father continued:

"Then the Nor'Westers started annoying those who stayed. A lot of our horses and sheep were stolen. There's a man by the name of *Alexander* Macdonell arrived here now with a bunch of half-breeds from Fort Qu'Appelle, out west. A fellow called Cuthbert Grant, who is a half-breed himself, is leading the ruffians. I'm afraid we've been tricked."

"Why did you stay," I asked, "when you could have gone, too?"

I was never more proud of my father than I was at that moment. He drew himself up. I could see that he was tired and worn out.

"The right to live in peace is the privilege of God, and not the whim of lustful men," he said in his rich, deep voice. "This land has been kinder to me than any other I have ever tilled. I am going to stay. This

country is too big and too bountiful to leave in the hands of a few wicked men who would despoil it for their own gain. No, Ronnie. I couldn't turn traitor to the land."

Father never preached, but those few words were a profound sermon if I ever heard one. I shot a glance around the room. Everyone was silently looking at him, and I'm sure we all felt very proud and humble in the presence of a man whose courage was so great, and whose trust was so deep.

I told them, then, what had happened to me in the year since I had seen them. Then I asked, "What do you think they'll do next?"

"I don't know," Father replied. "They put a few musket balls into the walls of this cabin last night. God knows what will happen now."

I learned that it was June 24, 1815. Many things were to happen on that day. Kat and I were dead tired, so Mother put us to bed in the back room. It seemed to me that we had just closed our eyes when I felt someone shaking me. I was awake in an instant and looking into the terror-filled face of Annette.

"Ronnie!" she breathed. "Ronnie! They're coming! They've set fire to all the empty cabins around. Oh, Ronnie! What can we do?"

I soothed her as best I could. "Don't worry now. We'll get out of it somehow." Outside I could hear the crack of muskets. Kat who had been beside me on the bunk was already on his feet.

"Half-breeds shoot at us. Come on. This bad!"

I gave Annette's hand a squeeze and went into the main room of the cabin. She followed, lying down flat on the floor beside the three other women where they would be safe from bullets. Father and Mr. Colby crouched behind the two windows, their long muskets pointing out over the sills. As fast as they could load and fire they were pouring lead out across the trampled gardens. I eased up beside Father and peered out. He spoke to me sharply.

"Back, Ronnie! You'll get hit!"

I shot a glance out the window. Several Métis were working their way towards our cabin, clinging to every bit of cover they could find. While I was watching, one of them ran from one clump of brush to another closer to our log stronghold. I saw Father's musket barrel swing as the man ran. There was a crack and the half-breed howled, clutching his arm, and beating a hasty retreat.

I shot a desperate glance around the room. There was one old musket still on its pegs over the mantel. It was in my hands in a moment. It was loaded. I knelt across from Father, peering out cautiously, awaiting my chance to avenge the treachery of the traders. It came quickly.

A yelling, shouting, painted figure made a run for the cabin. Father half rose and fired, but missed him. The man dropped to his knee and his return shot almost blended with the roar of Father's gun. I saw my parent spin back and fall. The half-breed was only a few yards away. I took careful aim and fired.

An amazed look spread over the face of the half-breed as my bullet struck him fairly in the chest. He reeled back, clutched at his throat, and collapsed in a welter of blood and dying curses. I shouted in grim, savage satisfaction.

Kat pushed me aside with, "You look after Big Macmillan. Him hurt. I shoot here."

Father was sitting up. "I'm . . . I'm all right, Ronnie!" he gasped weakly. "He nicked me in the shoulder. It isn't bad . . ."

The rest of that day is etched indelibly on my memory. The attacks of the Métis became half-hearted when they saw that we intended to fight it out. Across the prairies I could see the burning cabins of the settlers who had gone with Cameron.

The muzzle of my gun stayed hot. Father was not too badly hurt. Mother bound up his wound. Kat, Mr. Colby, and I remained at the windows. Night came at last.





Chapter Fourteen

SETTLEMENT'S END

WE DIDN'T show a light, and all night long we took turns at the windows. The women put Father to bed.

When dawn broke at last, there was no sign of the Métis. It's a wonder they didn't try to stalk our place in the dark, but I guess they had sobered considerably when they lost one of their men under my musket. They were a senseless lot in many ways, and wouldn't fight a fair fight if they could avoid it. It's a good job they didn't come back that night, because it would have been touch and go against them in the dark.

The empty cabins near us were in ashes. I knew things couldn't go on much longer like this.

After breakfast, I announced, "I'm going down to the Governor's house and see if I can find out what the settlers are going to do."

Kat said, "Me go my father's camp. Get help. Back soon."

Mother didn't like the idea of my going out in the open, but I pointed out that I looked like an Indian and would be more likely to make the trip unmolested.

Annette's wide eyes blinked hard as I pulled on my leathern head band and stuck a feather in it. She was at the door when I left.

"Do be careful, Ronnie. Please . . ."

I tweaked her under the chin and grinned, and she smiled back. I caught a glimpse of Father gazing anxiously after me as I hurried away.

I hadn't gone far down the road when I saw someone coming. The man was riding hard, and as he dashed towards me I raised my hand. He slowed. It was one of the Hudson's Bay officers—a man by the name of James McIntosh. He looked down at me as his trembling, lather-covered horse pranced in the road.

"My name is Macmillan," I began. "I'm not really an Indian. What are the settlers going to do?"

His jaw dropped. "You're John's son, then! The one the Nor'Westers kidnapped! Aye, lad, I have bad news. Get your family to the Governor's house right away. Those half-white rascals from the West may attack in force any minute. Hurry now, boy. There isn't any time to lose!"

A half hour later all my folks, the Colbys, Annette, and Mrs. Fraser, too, were outside the Governor's house. Settlers were pouring in from all directions and it wasn't long before those who were left in the Settlement

had gathered among the buildings near the administrative centre of the colony.

There were about forty-five or fifty of them, and they were a confused, frightened, and bewildered lot. Sheriff Archibald Currie, a Hudson's Bay man who took charge of things when Miles Macdonell had been taken prisoner, came out of his office and held up his hand. The chatter of voices died down.

"All women and children, and wounded men—go into that cabin." He pointed to one of the Hudson's Bay buildings, quite close to the Governor's house. "It's Company property and I think the half-breeds will respect it. The rest of you come in here, quick. The attack may come any moment. Hurry!"

I went with our people to the door of the Company cabin, then hurried back to the Governor's house. The muskets had just been passed around when a blood-chilling whoop sounded outside and a stream of wild-looking horsemen raced by, firing blindly at us as they passed.

I could feel the excitement rising in my throat. I knew the thick walls of the Hudson's Bay cabin would protect the women and casualties inside there, but here it was different. Our men took turns at every window. There were about thirty of us in the house, which was ill-suited for defence.

All that morning the half-breeds kept rushing us. One by one our men fell back from the windows, clutching their arms or shoulders as the Métis bullets found their marks. We didn't have anyone killed until

a young fellow called Donald McEar spun back from his place, shot squarely in the neck. He died while I was trying to lift him out of the line of fire.

John McLeod, another Hudson's Bay man, helped me move young McEar's limp body to one side. There seemed to be a lull in the attacks, for our shots had counted, too, and the ground outside was dotted with prostrate men and dead horses.

The whole thing suddenly became sickening to me, and at the same time, I was covered with sweat from the heat of the fight we were putting up. I got one of the half-breeds myself, then. I went back to the window after leaving the McEar lad in a lifeless heap against the wall, and just as I peeked out, a Métis swung his horse towards the cabin where the women and children were hiding. I deliberately aimed at him as he rode. I squeezed the trigger. He went right over the horse's head, and flopped around for a minute on the ground before he lay still.

In the early afternoon there were only a dozen of us who hadn't stopped a Métis bullet somewhere in our bodies. I had escaped so far. The half-breeds had drawn off. Like a bolt from the blue, I thought of something! I clutched John McLeod by the sleeve.

"Mr. McLeod. I . . . I . . ."

"You're too young for this sort of thing, Ronnie," he soothed. "You'd better have a rest." One of the settlers, Hugh McLean, stood beside us listening.

"Mr. McLeod!" I repeated. "I think I know where there's a cannon . . ."

"What . . .?" Then he said, disappointedly, "Oh, they took our cannon."

"I know," I continued, "but once a long time ago when I was prowling around the old shed back of the storehouse I saw a swivel gun lying among the traps. It might still be there. If we could get that . . ."

McLeod's eyes sparkled. "Ronnie! Are you sure . . .?"

"I'm sure. It wasn't mounted, but we could rig it up some way and use *something* for ammunition. Do you suppose we could get it?"

McLeod slapped his knee. "If we could reach the smithy we could cut up chain on the anvil and use that! Let's . . ."

McLean interrupted him. "There's a cart at the back of this cabin! I'll go after the gun while the lull is on! Get the men into the smithy, McLeod. This could turn the tide!"

He was out of the room, and away before we could answer him. McLeod said to me, "You're a good man to have around, Macmillan." Then he told the others in a few crisp words why there was still hope.

The smithy was only a few yards away. All of us watched breathlessly, and when the brave Hugh McLean appeared from across the way, pushing the rusty, old cannon on a two-wheeled cart, we yelled ourselves hoarse. He was safe in the smithy before we could gather up all our powder, shot, and arms to carry to our new fortress.

In a few minutes we were all in the blacksmith shop. The forge was soon glowing red, and the long chain

stored in the smithy was being cut into short lengths. The water in the wooden hogshead sizzled as we cooled the red hot pieces. James McIntosh and Hugh McLean had mounted the gun on a makeshift carriage. I helped cram powder down her throat, and we rammed in our chain shot.

We hadn't finished a minute before Archibald Currie, the Sheriff, shouted excitedly:

"Here they come! They've seen us move! Look at them! All in a body! Get ready!—Fire!"

The blast of the field piece deafened me. I had a quick impression of falling men, and the squeal of wounded horses filled the air with clamour. Several of our attackers fell under that devastating charge of hurtling chain. The rest sped by in confusion while our men coolly emptied their muskets at them through the wide crevices between the logs.

They didn't come back.

My knuckles whitened on my musket barrel. I couldn't figure out why they'd drawn off. *Then* I saw why the half-breeds had gone. A band of full-blooded Indians was riding towards us, armed to the teeth, fierce-looking, with savage painted faces. And in the lead astride one of the angular, spotted ponies I used to ride last year sat Kat!

I was out the door and racing towards the Indians before the men inside the smithy knew what was happening. Kat's face was grave as he sat erect on his mount. I slithered to a stop beside him.

"Kat! Where did these Indians come from? How...?"

My friend held up his hand. "They Saulteaux. My father, him send message to Saulteaux chief week ago. Tell him half-breeds fight whites. Saulteaux chief, him know my father. Him like. Chief bring all braves. You all right now."

While I was talking our men poured out of the smithy, gathering around me while I spoke to Kat. Then the door of the old Hudson's Bay cabin burst open, and in a moment the entire colony milled around inside the protecting square formed by the stolid Indian riders.

I saw right away that we couldn't carry on the one-sided battle. Several of our men who had been hit while in the Governor's house or the smithy collapsed to the ground. Excited, scared women worked over them. Children were crying. I saw Mother and Annette comforting a young lad who sobbed with shock as he gazed stupidly at his dangling, broken leg. There were only about ten of us who hadn't been wounded. Somewhere a baby wailed loudly.

I sought out Father. His arm was in a sling, and his face was drawn and pale. I had no sooner asked, "Father! Are you all right?" than the sudden, shrill scream of a woman sounded above the excited clamour and I snapped my head to see a horseman approaching with a white flag above his head. I heard John McLeod mutter, "That's Cuthbert Grant. He's the leader of the Qu'Appelle half-breeds."

Qu'Appelle half-breeds! So that was it! Alexander Macdonell had done his treacherous work too well. I recalled bitterly the words of this Nor'West chief back

in the meeting room at Fort William. He'd certainly seen to it that the Qu'Appelle half-breeds had come down to the Red to 'take things in their own hands.'

McLeod talked to the Métis leader for a few minutes. Then the half-breed wheeled and galloped away. I didn't hear much of what went on for the next half hour, for just at that moment Father suddenly slumped to the grass and said, "I don't feel good, Ronnie!"

My heart was in my mouth as I looked at him. He was white, and he looked old and tired. I raced to the Governor's house for some water, and Mother, Annette, and I revived him. His wounded shoulder was more than the nick he had said it was. I could have cheerfully turned a musket on any half-breed in sight, while I bandaged his shoulder again and freshened him up.

Kat came over to where I sat with Father's head on my lap. He looked down at me, but he didn't say anything.

"What are they going to do?" I asked harshly.

Kat shrugged. "Half-breed chief, him say we go free if we leave colony now. McLeod say we go Jack River. It up top Lake Winnipeg. Me tell Saulteaux. They no trust half-breeds. They come with us to end of Red River. We go tomorrow."

"Is anybody staying at all?" I asked.

Kat nodded. "McLeod, him stay. Three others. All rest go. Me get Wallie, Robert Fraser from my father's camp. They better go, too. They help."

We packed what we could that night. Wallie and Robert Fraser arrived at the cabin early in the evening.

I thought my brother's grip would crush my hand when he first greeted me. The next day our York boats drifted out into the current and headed north. They carried everybody from the colony, except McLeod, Currie, and McIntosh, the three Hudson's Bay men who had helped us, and one brave, stubborn settler who refused to budge—Alexander McLean.

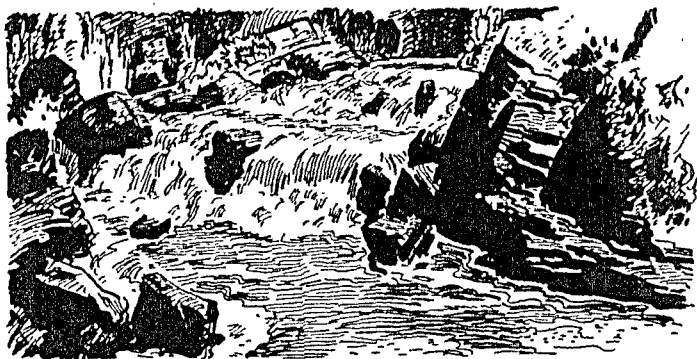
A long string of dusky horsemen kept abreast of us on the bank. The friendly *Saulteaux* were taking no chances on a *Métis* ambush against us. They rode with us all the way to the mouth of the Red.

I was on a sweep in the leading York boat. Kat sat opposite me. Yes. He'd come. He wouldn't hear of staying behind. My family and Annette and her parents were in the same boat. Father was propped up against the side, looking better now that his fever had subsided. Our last sight of the colony was tinged with the smoke of freshly burning cabins as the war-crazed *Métis* laid waste our hard-won homes.

A year ago I suppose I would have gulped and felt sad. But now I just gritted my teeth and promised that some day I'd pay back Cameron, Dwyer, Macdonell, and the rest of them for their treachery. Kat was looking at me.

"Colony all done," he said quietly.

"No, Kat," I replied grimly. "We'll be back. This fight has only just started."



Chapter Fifteen

PERIL ON THE PORTAGE

WE ARRIVED at the old, abandoned Hudson's Bay post of Jack River in July, 1815. There wasn't much there—just a few broken-down buildings clustered at the mouth of the river. A man by the name of Bannerman had taken charge of the settlers, and he certainly did a grand job.

First, he ordered Kat and me to work supplying game for the camp, because we were the only ones familiar with the bush. I enjoyed it. We roamed the forest, making every musket ball count, and hardly a day went by that we didn't drag a fat buck into the mess hut. We set night lines in the river, and snares in the bush, and somebody produced a couple of big fish nets which we placed out in the lake over the shoals just off the shore.

Time and again we'd paddle in from emptying those nets, our canoe almost swamped with the weight of the big, squirming fish that practically filled it. The wilderness certainly treated us well that summer, as if to make up for the way some of its people had acted.

Bannerman put all the other able-bodied men to work on the buildings, and in a week everybody was reasonably well sheltered. The wounded men were given the best huts, and Kat spent hours in the bush searching for wild herbs and roots from which he made soothing ointments and broths to ease their hurts. This Indian boy's knowledge of the forest and what was in it was astounding. Whenever anybody fell sick, Kat would be on the job. Away he would go, prying fungus off thick tree trunks, gathering funny-looking roots, stems, and leaves, boiling them, mixing them, and finishing up with a concoction which was eyed askance by the victim, but which always seemed to prove an effective remedy.

"My grandmother show me medicine roots," he explained to me. "Me know make medicine good."

He certainly did. Father was soon well again. Often he'd go hunting with Kat and me in the bush, or help us empty our nets. Wallie, too, used to come along, and I came to know my brother better that year than I ever had before.

And Annette—we'd sit around the camp fire at nights, listening to a leaky, old set of pipes on which Mr. Bannerman would squeeze out the familiar songs of our native Highlands, and we'd dream as we watched

the orange tongues of flame lick up and disappear in the black sky overhead.

If it hadn't been for the fact that I knew we couldn't stay at Jack River very long, I think I would have been quite content to go right on living as we were, outcasts from a dangerous colony, and children of a friendly forest. But I knew we were too far north to survive a winter with our present equipment and supplies.

Just when I was wondering what we'd do, the answer appeared over the lake—a flotilla of graceful voyageur canoes, filled with big, broad-shouldered, sun-tanned men who approached the camp singing as they dipped their paddles. It was late summer—oh, about the middle of August, I should say.

We all crowded down to the shore as they landed, and I heard the news of our colony for the first time since we'd left. The Captain of the brigade was speaking to Mr. Bannerman as I edged close to hear him.

“—and McLeod and the other three beat the Métis off. Those four men have worked like slaves. Your colony isn't in bad shape. They've built a new Governor's House and put up a stockade around it and some other buildings. It's now called Fort Douglas!” My heart thrilled as I listened. “McLeod has had a lot of help from the French Canadians and Indians. He's fixed the fences and he has a field of grain there which should go a long way towards feeding you people this winter.”

“And where did you come from?” asked Bannerman,

My eyes widened as the strapping, big man answered, “We're part of Colin Robertson's brigade. Lord Selkirk

sent us West to help the colony, but we arrived too late. We're here to take you all back to the Red."

"Lord Selkirk!" Bannerman's voice crackled.

"He'll be in Montreal before the snow flies." He stopped, looked around. Tingles of excitement ran up and down my spine at his next words: "Have you a fellow by the name of Ronnie Macmillan here? And an Indian called Kat?"

Bannerman swung his head. I was at his side in about two jumps. The voyageur smiled.

"I've got a job for you. Colin Robertson's brigade is so small we can't spare a single man. But he wants to get a message to Selkirk at Montreal. As long as you get there before freeze-up you'll be all right. I..."

"Me . . . Montreal?" I gasped.

"Robertson's heard all about your trip to Fort William and back. If you can do that, you can certainly make the journey east. Here's the letter for the Earl. Will you deliver it?"

He handed me a well-wrapped, sealed missive which I took with shaking fingers.

"What's . . . what's in it?" I asked weakly.

"Just the story of how the Nor'Westers have tried to break up the colony. You know it, maybe, as well as anybody. But it's here in writing for you to carry to the Earl."

"But . . . but . . ." I started.

The big man laughed. "Well, McLeod, too, says you're the man to make the trip. He calls you his 'buckskin colonist,' and he . . ."

"Is John McLeod all right?" I broke in.

"He is that. And he's getting ready for a fresh batch of Scottish settlers who should be along from York Factory almost any day now. A new Governor by the name of Semple is coming out with them."

Kat, Father, and Wallie had moved up beside me when they saw me with the white square in my hand. I didn't hesitate any longer.

"Kat and I will start tomorrow," I promised.

The voyageur's slap on my shoulders almost loosened my teeth. "Good lad!" he cried. "We'll stock your canoe tonight."

Mother and Annette wept over me, while Father and Wallie stood by proudly when we left the next morning. The rest of our people were packing, getting ready to go back to the Red.

The crowd on the shore cheered as we slipped away over the glassy water. We headed south, paddling steadily, and when nightfall came we had traversed the lake for some little distance. We camped well back in the bush, and next morning at daylight we were on our way again. For the next week we pushed on, turning up the Winnipeg River, slipping past the Nor'West post of Bas-de-la-Rivière in the night, fighting against the mighty current of the wide stream we were ascending.

Every time I felt that thick letter inside my shirt, and the pouch of British bills the voyageur had given me to buy supplies on the long trip, my whole body thrilled, and I dug in my paddle with new vigour as we fought our way upstream.



I felt my foot slip on a piece of smooth, wet granite and the next moment I was in the air.

I'd heard the whole story of how Lord Selkirk was coming to our rescue, and how he was battling the powerful Nor'Westers on our behalf. I supposed by this time, Governor Semple and his new colonists would be on the Red, or nearly there at least.

Every time I thought of McLeod and Colin Robertson picking Kat and me to carry out this mission for him, I felt pleased. I'd heard of Robertson, who had once been a Nor'Wester himself, and who had come over to the Hudson's Bay Company after he had been badly treated by the North-West Company. He was one of the most famous voyageurs in the country.

Kat and I didn't talk much. We were too tired. He planned to stop at his home encampment, to which he had taken me after my escape from Cameron last year, there to get a guide to take us through the maze of waterways leading to Lake Superior.

Fatigue grew in my body until I went through the motions of paddling without really knowing what I was doing. Paddle, paddle, paddle. Lift the packs. Hoist the canoe to weary shoulders. Tramp around a rapids. Pole up a shallows. Track up another rapids, over shelves that looked like weirs, into quiet water again. Camp, a quick meal, a sound sleep, awake in the misty dawn and away, on and on, up the surging river.

One day when the clouds were low in the sky and we were soaked by a chill rain, we neared a heavy rapids and landed on the shore. Kat lifted our canoe to his shoulders and started along the well-worn portage trail beside the river. During the days and weeks in the bush,

I had toughened up to a point where I could carry a hundred and fifty pounds without any trouble. I had a little more than that on my back this day, and the tump line around my forehead was straining my neck.

We came to a point where the trail became steep and rocky, and above us it skirted a jagged ledge of rock which dropped to the river's edge like a saw tooth. Kat stopped for a rest before starting up the dangerous path. He glanced at my heavy load and said, "You better take two trips. Your load too heavy for trail."

"If you can handle the canoe, I can handle this," I replied, a bit stubbornly.

"Canoe not half as heavy as your load," he persisted. "You better do as me say."

"I'll manage all right," I said carelessly.

Kat shrugged. He swung the canoe to his shoulders and started the climb. I hadn't gone ten feet before I realized that Kat was right. I should have split my load as he suggested, but I gritted my teeth and went ahead. It was a foolish thing to do.

One minute I was labouriously ascending the rocky trail. I looked down to my left. Cruel rocks fell away fifty feet to the gravelly river below. I felt my foot slip on a piece of smooth, wet granite and the next moment I was in the air. My leg struck a sharp outcrop. I heard a sickening snap as a wave of excruciating pain blotted everything else out of my mind. I can remember thinking as I fell that I would never reach Selkirk with a broken leg, and then my head banged against a boulder and the world turned black.





Chapter Sixteen

SNOW-BOUND

I DON'T remember much about what happened after that. I can recall hazy pictures of opening my eyes and looking up into Kat's anxious face; of hastily gulping thick, hot soup which my companion almost forced into my mouth; of being jolted around, and of lying for long, confused, pain-filled hours in front of a fire.

I don't think I ever came awake without my faithful friend at my side. His voice soothed me, and urged me to fight the almost overwhelming desire to close my eyes for good, and forget all about living.

Then I was alone, and for a while I awoke into fitful, frightening periods of consciousness when there was no Kat near me. I would sink back into the shadows of oblivion, shaking with fright and racked by a searing ache in my head and right leg.

It seemed a sort of a dream to me. The next thing I knew, Kat was back, along with other Indians, and then I felt that I was floating along. I caught fleeting glimpses of feathered heads above me, and knew I was being carried. Now there was a babble of voices in my ears, then warmth, finally sleep.

When I awoke one day and stayed awake, I realized that I was really alive. My eyes strained in the gloom around me. The thick bark over my head told me I was in a wigwam. I tried to lift my arm, but the effort was too much, and I let my hand fall back. I must have cried out in my weakness, for the next thing I knew the wrinkled, kindly face of an old Indian woman came into my vision. Her features broke into a wide grin. Then she disappeared.

In a moment Kat was bending over me and I heard his voice for the first time in years, it seemed to me.

"Ron-ee! Ron-ee! You live! Me 'fraid. You hurt bad on river. You feel good now?"

I struggled with my reply, fighting to talk, but the only word that would come was, "Kat!"

Then I went to sleep, properly to sleep this time, and for the next few days I wakened only to gulp the thick stew I was offered, mumble a few words, then fall back again, worn out by the effort.

My head started to clear, and presently I tried to piece together what had happened up to the moment I had spun over the rocks with that heavy load of supplies on my back. When I was fully awake, I could see that I really *was* in a wigwam made from thick, stained

birch bark. A small, hot fire burned away in the centre of the tepee. I could feel its warmth on my face.

An old Indian woman sat cross-legged at my side. She reached over and pushed my long hair back from my face and I tried to smile. She got up and hurried out. In a moment Kat bent over me. I looked up at him.

"Kat," I started slowly, "what happened? I . . . I . . ."

"Ron-ee!" Kat's voice was full of pleasure. "You awake good now. Long time you sleep hard, talk like spirits. You live again. Me glad."

I reached out and gripped his lean, brown hand. I was still as weak as a kitten, but fully aware now of what was going on around me.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"You here. My people's camp. You safe."

"I can't think . . ." I started. "How did I get here?"

"You fall bad back on Rapids-That-Sing. Hit head. Break bone in leg. Me fix with sticks like white doctor fix my arm at colony. Me make you eat. Me paddle you, carry you. Soon me get to portage where we go first time you see my people. Me hide you in bush. Get my brothers. They come, carry you to village. You die we all think. We make you eat. Long time we wait. Now you live. Me glad," he finished, simply.

As he talked, the crazy thoughts I recalled in garbled fragments began to fit into some semblance of order. I questioned him again.

"What day is it?"

His face clouded. "Snow-god fills land. You no travel till sun melts snow again!"

I peered at him through incredulous eyes. Snow! That meant I'd been here for weeks, because it had been August when we had left Jack River. I found out later that I had come to my senses in October, and that I had lain between life and death for long, dreary days and nights while Kat nursed me, forcing hot stew juice down my throat every time I came to, never daring to leave me unless his old Indian aunt took his place.

I was as thin as a rail. Kat had done a remarkably good job of setting my leg. It was still in ingenious splints, wrapped carefully with hide thongs. Kat told me that he had made a frame which he had secured to the ground with stakes, and that it had kept my leg rigid as a post all that time I had lain in the wigwam.

It was my head that bothered me more than my leg now, and while I didn't know it at the time, I had suffered a skull fracture in my fall, and that was why I had stayed in a half-awake condition for so long.

As soon as Kat mentioned snow, I thought of our mission to Lord Selkirk.

"Kat, what about our trip to Montreal? How . . ."

Kat frowned. "Too bad. Message gone."

"Gone? You mean you sent it on ahead with one of your tribe?"

He shook his head. "No. Lost. It fall out your shirt I guess, while I carry you. Me pretty tired. No see it. Try to find. No see any place. Me sorry."

Suddenly the words of the voyageur captain, who had handed me that packet back at Jack River, flashed across my mind: ". . . you know the story as well as anybody, but it's here in writing for you . . ." I squeezed Kat's arm and said, "Don't worry about it, Kat. I know the story, and we'll push on as soon as we can. I'll tell Lord Selkirk all about the colony. When do you think we'll be able to travel?"

"Freeze-up early this year. We no go till spring. Stay here for winter."

I began to fret and chafe at my inability to start on for Montreal, but as the winter tightened its grip on the land, I realized the wisdom of Kat's decision to stay in the safety of the Ojibwa encampment until the weather softened. Blinding snowstorms engulfed the huddled tepees, and the cold swept down like a knife-edge.

I was on my feet before the month was out, and my strength returned rapidly under the watchful eye of Kat's kindly, old aunt, whose name I learned to my secret amusement was an Ojibwa word meaning '*Sweet Blossom*.' She stuffed me with choice bits of venison and other game, as my ravenous appetite strove to make up for the weeks I had subsisted on broth.

The snow piled high as the winter wore on. The Ojibwas treated me like a brother. The chief gave me a beautiful outfit of furs, and before long I was as much a part of the camp as any of the natives in it.

I began to help them on their trap lines, limping around at first while I learned to walk all over again.

I helped build big deadfalls to catch larger animals—fox and wolves. I set spring pole traps for smaller animals, and fished through holes chopped in the ice. I used snow-shoes for the first time in my life—long, beautifully made snow-shoes with turned-up ends, and before many weeks had passed I was as hard as nails, and could take my place in the trapping parties and return after a gruelling tramp just as fresh as any of my dusky companions.

It was a wonderful experience—that winter in the Ojibwa camp. I came to be pretty good in their language, and with my dark complexion and long black hair, coupled with the chief's gift of furs, I looked as much like an Indian as any of them.

They were so good to me, oh, so good! It was an extremely cold winter, but we found plenty of game and fared well. The ice was still on the lakes in late May—I had an idea of the time of the year because I made a notch in a stick each day, and in that way kept track of the passing weeks.

Then the ice went out with a thunder that filled the forest with deep rumblings. Kat and I were ready to travel, but it rained for days after the break-up, pouring steadily from a lowering, cold sky. We decided to wait until the weather cleared.

One morning while we plodded around the sodden camp ground, a canoe slipped into shore before we realized that anyone was coming. It was lucky for me that I was behind a tepee well up from the bank, for two white men stepped from the water-soaked craft,

and there, staring around, bedraggled, but with an insolent grin on his face, was my old enemy Tom Dwyer, along with another man!

I almost jumped out of my moccasins!

I felt sure they were after me, as Dwyer's eyes scanned the Ojibwas who gathered around the two white men.

The sky was breaking, and patches of blue showed in the clouds like bits of torn linen. The chief came down to the water's edge, and then began a conversation between him and our visitors that sent tingling chills up and down my spine. From my vantage point behind the tepee, I could hear everything that was said.

Before it was over I could hardly hold back a savage urge to whip out my knife and settle Dwyer for once and for all. I shivered a little and wondered if living with my Indian friends for so long had somehow brought out primitive instincts in me that I didn't know I possessed.

The fellow with Dwyer did the talking. He couldn't speak the Ojibwa dialect any better than I could, so I had no difficulty in following him.

First he told the chieftain that he and his companion were from the North-West post of Bas-de-la-Rivière, down at the mouth of the Winnipeg River.

Then he tried his best to persuade the chief to lead a band of Indian braves against the Red River colony! He promised the old man and his warriors all the merchandise and rum in three North-West posts if he would go on the war-path against the settlers.

I could hardly believe my ears as he talked, wheedling out his request and fawning on the fine old Indian chief who had been so kind to me. I glanced at Kat. He stood there, arms folded, watching the men angrily.

I knew then why Cameron had wanted Dwyer to come back West with him—to get our traitorous settler to incite the natives against our people. The chief was silent as the man finished his speech.

The old Indian asked him if he had the permission of the military authorities to carry out such an attack. The Nor'Wester admitted that it was entirely his own idea and in a few minutes the palaver came to an end as the proud chief not only refused, but suggested that the pair had better be on their way at once.

A hundred fearful thoughts raced through my brain as I watched the Nor'West canoe disappear back up the river. Kat touched my elbow.

"Traders after your people again, eh? We better go Selkirk, quick!"

It was a swift departure we made. That surprise visit of Dwyer's prompted me to stain my face and hands before we left, so I could pass as an Indian once more on my journey east. Ona-bedac, the brave who had guided us last year, had returned to his home encampment shortly after we had escaped from Fort William, and now he again offered to help us find our way to Lake Superior, this time over the southern route which would take us to this great inland sea by way of the Pigeon River, about seventy miles or so south-west of Fort William.

It must have been well past the middle of June when we reached the Winnipeg River and were again working our way up its turbulent waters. Ona-bedac was as silent as ever, but he knew how to paddle. Our progress was slow because of the numerous portages we had to make.

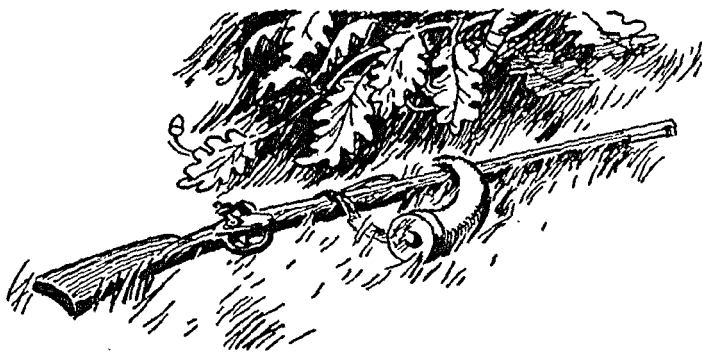
But we struck some good stretches of water as well, and on one of these, about three or four days after we'd left Kat's encampment, we received a great surprise. Our canoe nosed around a bend and there, directly in our path but still some distance away, were four big voyageur craft coming down the river towards us. It's funny how my sense of caution had sharpened while I was in the bush. My first instinct was to swing our canoe close to shore and get ready to make a hurried landing and run for it, if the approaching flotilla turned out to be Nor'Westers.

But I had foreseen just such a meeting when I had stained my face before leaving the Ojibwa camp, so I said, "We'll keep right on, Kat."

The canoes ahead of us came closer. I peered at the occupants, while the paddlers greeted us with friendly waves and shouts. Suddenly my heart leaped at the sight of a tall, serious-faced man in the centre of the lead canoe. An involuntary yell filled my throat as I recognized him."

"Miles Macdonell! Miles Macdonell!" I shouted.

Our old Governor stared at me in amazement.



Chapter Seventeen

MASSACRE!

THERE WAS no recognition in his eyes as he barked an order to his men, who back-watered their paddles and brought the big canoe to a halt, while Kat and Onabedac dug their paddles deep and swung our smaller craft to the larger one's side.

But there was a look of wonder on his face. I can understand that, because hearing a Scottish voice suddenly sing out one's name from a canoe, where nobody was apparent except three young Ojibwa braves, isn't exactly a regular happening on these lonely northern rivers.

"Is it really you?" I asked.

He still looked at me blankly. I could hardly believe that our old Governor sat before me in the flesh. No one around the colony had heard what had happened

to him after he had courageously given himself up to the treacherous Cameron in a futile attempt to appease the Nor'Westers last spring.

"I'm Ronald Macmillan, sir," I went on. "Don't you remember two years ago when I went to Fort La Souris with Father and didn't come back? I . . ."

Miles Macdonell let out a shout: "Ronald Macmillan! My good lad! I was terribly worried when your father told me about your capture, and then we got word from the Ojibwas that you had escaped and gone to Fort William. Thank heaven, nothing happened to you."

"A lot has happened to me, sir," I rejoined, "but nothing too serious."

His eyes swept over me. I could see the curiosity in his face so I said, "This Indian outfit is handy when I'm in enemy country. It's already brought me through some tight spots."

"If you hadn't spoken I'd never suspected you to be white," he chuckled. His face sobered as he went on; "What are you doing here? The colonists—how are they making out?"

I told him my story. He listened, nodding as I recounted the hardships of the settlers. When I told him about Colin Robertson and McLeod sending me east, he looked up sharply.

"That was last fall. Do you know what's happened since?"

I shook my head, continuing my experiences. When I'd finished he said, "You're going east to Montreal now, then?"

"Yes."

He rubbed his grizzled chin, and said thoughtfully, "I think that might still be a good idea."

The dozen questions in my mind spilled out. "Are you going to the colony now? How did you get away from the Nor'Westers? What . . ."

He smiled and held up his hand. "Just a minute, young man. I'll tell you *my* story now, and that will probably answer all your questions."

He swiftly recounted how he had been taken to Fort William by the Nor'Westers, and how he had found John Spencer already there, a prisoner. The two of them had been conducted to Montreal under arrest, charged with felony, breach of the peace, and a lot of other misdemeanours.

Miles Macdonell hurried on: "John and I were tried together. The Nor'Westers certainly used every letter of the law to make things hot for us. They kept us under lock and key in Montreal until Lord Selkirk arrived and got us out. That was last December."

He stopped, glancing around at the other canoes which had drawn close. The husky voyageurs listened interestedly to our conversation. "As soon as the ice went out this spring, the Earl sent me west at once with this advance party."

"Then you're on your way to the colony!" I almost shouted.

"And not a minute too soon, I suspect from the way you're talking," he replied.

"Where is Lord Selkirk now?" I asked hopefully.

"He should be on his way west at this moment—with a large party of trained soldiers. He has upwards of a hundred men with him. They're fine fellows, demobilized from the de Meuron, Watteville, and Glengarry Fencibles Regiments, which fought with us against the Americans. You heard about the war, didn't you?"

I nodded hurriedly. He went on: "These men will make good settlers, and they can defend themselves if the colony is ever attacked again."

My thoughts raced with the good news. "Is Lord Selkirk far behind you?" I questioned.

My heart sank when he replied. "He planned to leave Montreal early this month, but such a large party will travel rather slowly. I'm sure that if he heard your story he'd split up his men and send another brigade ahead in canoes. That's why I say it's still a good idea for you to try and reach him as quickly as you can."

"He doesn't know how bad things are on the Red?"

"I'm sure he doesn't. All he's heard is what I've told him myself."

"Which way is the Earl coming?" I asked.

"Along the American shore of Lake Superior, up the Pigeon River, and on through Rainy Lake—that's the way we came."

"When do you think he'll reach the mouth of the Pigeon at Lake Superior?"

"Not before the middle of August at the earliest."

"That means we'll have to travel the Lake if we want to reach him before that?"

Macdonell nodded. I grinned in spite of myself, for I was looking forward to traversing that huge body of water, and I was almost glad in a way that it would be necessary to cross the great Superior. Macdonell continued:

"You'll be all right as long as you don't get too far out in the lake. Don't go all the way to Fond du Lac. That's a North-West post, you know, away down at the south-west tip of Superior. Cut across the narrow part of the bay when you first catch sight of the opposite shore. You should meet Lord Selkirk's party some time next month, or early in August at the latest."

We separated, and in a few minutes Kat, Ona-bedac, and I were alone on the wild Winnipeg River once more. We reached the Lake of the Woods, traversed its sparkling waters, entered the Rainy River, then Rainy Lake, and struck south-east again. We crossed so many lakes and paddled over so many rivers that I lost all count of them. It was early in July when the vast expanse of Lake Superior stretched before our eyes.

It was an awe-inspiring sight to look out over the mighty Superior, and it was hard to realize that we were seeing a fresh-water lake. It might just as well have been the ocean, as far as I was concerned, for the water melted into the horizon without a trace of a shoreline on the far side.

Our guide stayed with us. We turned south, paddling steadily, urging our craft onwards through the never-ending lake. We were scooting along in the bright sunshine, close to Superior's western shore, just a day's

travel away from the mouth of the Pigeon River, when I happened to glance back at Kat as I made some casual remark.

I was in the bow for a stretch. My gaze shot past Kat, back over the route we had come. Far behind, but still close enough that I could see it was travelling at a fast clip, I caught sight of a canoe.

"Kat! Look! Isn't that craft following us?" I cried.

Kat's head turned. "It going fast. Wait."

I leaned on my paddle, watching the canoe approach. It swept along, and as it neared us I counted the flash of the paddles in the sun. They were doing close to fifty a minute. My senses sharpened as it drew close.

It veered towards us. I saw a haggard figure rising in the bow. My throat choked with alarm, for there, his face drawn with fatigue, was Miles Macdonell!

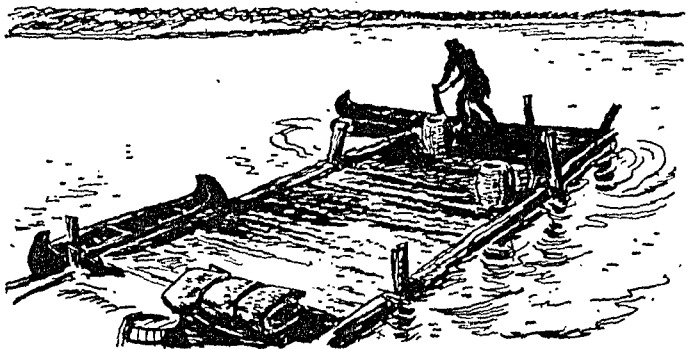
His canoe slithered to a stop beside ours, while his paddlers slumped on their seats. His eyes were staring and he looked years older than he had when we had met him on the Winnipeg River just a few weeks before.

"Ronnie!" His voice was a hoarse whisper. "I have terrible news!"

My heart jumped with premonition.

"What's happened?" I gulped.

"The half-breeds attacked the colony! Governor Semple is dead. So is Alexander McLean and twenty others. They were massacred near the seven big oak trees on Frog Plain on the nineteenth of June!"



Chapter Eighteen

DANGEROUS DAYS

FOR A SECOND I just looked at him with dumbfounded eyes, then the bottom seemed to drop out of my stomach. My mouth opened but no words came. I was choked with fear for the safety of my family at home.

"Steady, Ronald! Steady!" he said. "Your family is safe—but Wallie was taken prisoner, and the Nor' Westers are carrying him to Fort William. I was talking to your father. He said to tell you that the Colbys and Frasers were unharmed, too."

Relief, together with anxiety about Wallie, flooded my mind. "Where did you see them?" I asked.

"On Lake Winnipeg. The settlers were on their way to the Jack River again—all who were left of them."

"You didn't get to the colony, then?"

He shook his head sadly. "I was too late. Fort Douglas is in the hands of the Nor'Westers."

"Wallie—was he hurt?"

"No, but he was seized along with four others and will be sent to Fort William, so I learned."

"How did you manage to catch us?" I went on breathlessly.

"We met the settlers at the mouth of the Winnipeg River," Macdonell said, "just a few days after we left you. They were a frightened lot, and when they told me of the massacre, I picked out a crew of my best men and started back east again. I knew my paddlers could reach Selkirk before you, even if you did have a few days' lead. We must push on at once . . ." He slumped wearily on the canoe bottom. "We've been paddling eighteen hours a day," he finished.

Our craft rose and fell gently on the easy swell of the lake. I looked at his men. No wonder they had caught up with us. They had shoulders like oxen and their ribs were lean. They were stripped to the waist, and the sweat shone on their lithe muscles.

"They're fine fellows," Miles Macdonell said quietly.

"We'll go along with you . . ." I started.

Macdonell shook his head. "You'd never keep up with us. These voyageurs can cover a hundred miles a day."

"We'll follow you, then we can . . ."

"No. I've a better idea than that. Go to Fort William. Keep a sharp lookout for your brother, Wallie, and the other prisoners. Talk to them if you can, and

see if you can find out more about the Nor'Westers' plans."

"Fort William!" I ejaculated.

Macdonell scowled. "The Earl won't let this crime go unpunished," he growled. "He's a Scot, and when he's really aroused, he can be a terror. I can promise you that the news of the massacre will bring Lord Selkirk to Fort William, and in a hurry, too. He'll see that the Nor' Westers get what they deserve!"

Kat, who had been listening with stolid interest, now said, "We get Wallie away from traders?"

Macdonell smiled grimly. "You won't likely have a chance to do that. But you can keep your eyes and ears open. There's no telling what you might find out. And whatever you do, don't get caught. This struggle between us and the Nor'Westers is reaching its height now. You'd be classed as a spy, Ronnie, in that Indian get-up, and you might easily be shot."

Colonist. Voyageur. And now a spy! And in the enemy's camp at that. Some of those traders might still remember me. I looked at Kat. He shrugged, but said nothing. Macdonell aroused his men. Our craft separated. Across the growing space of water he shouted, "Stay in the neighbourhood of Fort William until Selkirk gets there. He'll need another three or four weeks to make the journey. I should meet him near Sault Ste. Marie. Good-bye!"

Three or four weeks. That would mean Selkirk wouldn't reach the North-West post until early in August. I looked at Macdonell's craft getting under

way, my mouth agape at the smoothness and power of the paddlers. They worked as one man, and in a few moments the canoe was flying over the water.

Soon the big craft was a fast-disappearing dot on the lake. We turned back, making our way up the north-west shore of Lake Superior. We plodded on steadily, and in two days came in sight of the islands which bar the approach to Thunder Bay, just outside Fort William. Our canoe crept behind the majestic headlands, through the deep waters. In the protecting darkness of a lovely July night, we paddled softly up the Kaministiquia River, past the great North-West post of Fort William.

Kat's people were overjoyed to see us again, and Kat had to tell them all about what had happened to us in the year since we had escaped from the post gaol. In my stumbling Ojibwa dialect I joined in, and it was nice to be among the friendly Indians again.

One morning, a few days after our arrival Kat said to me, "Nor'Westers have five settlers here. Wallie, him here!"

I jumped. "Wallie! And the others, too?"

He nodded. "They in fort now."

"Are they locked up?"

"No. They just in fort. Wallie, they let him go 'round."

"How did you find this out?"

"My people tell me. Dwyer. Him here, too. You watch out."

"Dwyer! But I've just got to talk to Wallie, Kat, Dwyer or not!"

"Traders catch you, they hurt you maybe. They all happy 'bout fight out at Red. You be careful."

I was too excited to worry about Kat's words just then, but they were more prophetic than I realized. I said, "I'm going to chance it, Kat. I'm going into the fort this afternoon. I've just got to talk to Wallie!"

Kat grunted. "Me come too; then. Bring some my people. They help much."

We didn't go that day.

About a half hour after we had been talking it started to rain, and in the early afternoon a blinding storm was raging over the land. Thunder crashed through the skies, and the torrents of water that gushed from the low-hanging clouds kept everybody under cover. I felt sure Wallie wouldn't be outside in the downpour. We waited.

It rained for three or four days. I've never seen such a storm. It was early in August when Kat, I, and two other Ojibwas from the encampment finally made our way through the mud towards the water-soaked palisades of Fort William.

The weather had suddenly cleared. Kat had given me a blanket and said, "Wrap around you. Keep head down. Pull hair over face."

We plodded to the gates. I shivered a little as I recalled the last time I had entered those log portals. Nobody paid any attention to us as we shuffled inside. The fort-dwellers were busy. The long storm had held up fur shipments to the East, and the warehouse was a hive of activity. Brigades were being made up at

the centre of the wharf, and huge, broad-beamed canoes were being filled with tightly-packed fur bales, which I knew would soon be on their way to Lower Canada and the fur marts of Montreal. I could hear the squeak of the press as we passed the open door—the old fur press where I had laboured for so many weeks a little over a year ago. I had a quick glimpse of a new building off to one side and it suddenly dawned on me that it was a new bunk house, replacing the one which Robert Fraser had fired the night Kat and I had escaped.

We wandered about for over an hour, and were just coming around the corner of the Great Hall when I caught sight of a lone figure which limped dejectedly across the area between the stone magazine and a storehouse. I could feel the excitement rising in me.

The man was dressed in the ragged colonist clothes which I knew so well. And on his head he was wearing a tam! I scurried around the Hall, taking up my position where he would have to pass me. He drew nearer. Huddling inside my blanket I peered at his face. It was Wallie! His eyes were on the ground, and he walked slowly.

I fell in behind him, casually following him as he wandered down between the buildings and towards the gate. Amazingly enough, he went right out, on to the wharf, shuffling to the far end where he slumped on an empty keg and sat there gazing idly out over the river. There was water on all three sides of the dock where he rested, and there wasn't anybody near him. The brigades were loading at the centre.

I padded across the worn planking towards him. Over my shoulder I could see Kat and my two Ojibwa friends behind me. They stopped as I neared my brother, slouching carelessly, but watching me with hawk eyes, I well knew.

Wallie never looked up as I shuffled past him. Out of the corner of my mouth I said, "Wallie! It's me—Ronnie! Don't pay any attention to me or we'll be spotted!"

He almost fell off the keg in surprise. I hurried on: "Are you all right?"

His voice was shaking as he blurted, "Ronnie! My good lad! Is it really you? Sure, I'm all right, except for a sprained leg."

I said, "I heard about the massacre. Our folks are safe?"

He nodded. I went on quickly, "Where are the traders keeping you?"

He was playing his part well. His gaze was directed away from me. "In the bunkhouse near the wall. The new one." He reached down casually and picked up a chip, "I'm allowed a lot of freedom. I suppose there's no place to escape to now that Fort Douglas has been lost. There are four other settlers with me."

I said, "Don't do anything rash for a few days. Then you'll be free."

"Why do you say that?"

"Lord Selkirk should be here within a week—" I started.

"Lord Selkirk . . . here?" he barked.

I nodded. Wallie went on. "God be thanked you told me that. We may still save His Lordship . . ."

"Save him?"

"The traders have plotted to kill him."

"Kill the Earl!" The words jumped from my mouth.

"I heard them planning it on Rainy Lake when they were bringing me here. Alexander Macdonell arranged with a half-breed to do it in the night. They were going to try while the Earl is going up the Pigeon River."

"They don't know he's coming this way?"

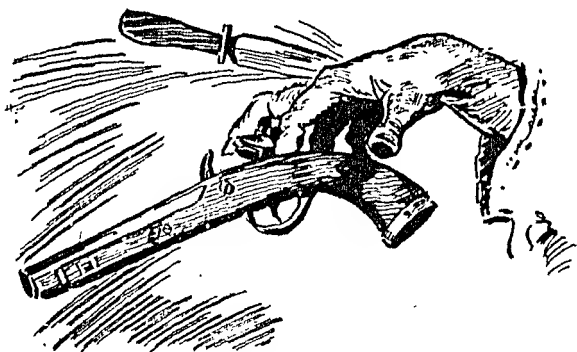
"No. But they'll learn soon enough, if what you say is right. And they'll try it here, of that you can be sure. This war between the fur companies is a desperate thing, Ronnie . . ."

"We'll have to warn him, then—" I started.

I didn't get a chance to finish what I was going to say. Just at that moment I heard Kat's long, low whistle of warning. My head snapped towards him. A couple of husky traders were hurrying down the wharf. I saw Kat and his two companions slowly following them.

My startled eyes whipped the other way. A canoe, which I had not noticed until now, was sidling along the low dock. My jaw dropped at the sight of the man who rose from its bottom, a look of triumph on his face.

It was Tom Dwyer!



Chapter Nineteen

GUNS IN THE MOONLIGHT

I WAS neatly cornered out on the end of the dock. I couldn't get back the way I had come because of the two Nor'Westers who barred the way. There was no point in swimming for it. Dwyer would have caught me in a minute with that canoe. He was on the planking now. I could see a pistol stuck in his belt.

I don't think he realized who I was until he was quite close, for his first words were barked at Wallie:

"Who's that you're talking to, Macmillan?"

We were right at the edge of the wharf. Dwyer was closer now. Suddenly he let out a yell, and fumbled for his pistol.

"Macmillan! You . . . !"

He'd recognized me in spite of my Indian disguise! I should have known he would, because he had seen me

a lot as I worked around Fort William last year, a Nor'West prisoner. I jumped back. I'd almost forgotten Kat and his companions in my excitement, but just then they took a hand in things.

Dwyer had his weapon out. Suddenly, miraculously, a whizzing knife bit into his hand. I shot a glance towards the two men who had approached from the fort. Behind them was Kat. His knife sheath was empty. He'd thrown the knife between them!

The next few minutes packed more danger into their fleeting seconds than any I can recall before or since.

Dwyer dropped the pistol. It exploded with a bang when it hit the planking. The two Ojibwas with Kat dived at the other two men who stood there stupidly, hardly knowing what was happening. The traders toppled into the water like falling trees. Dwyer was howling at the top of his voice, and holding his wrist from which the blood gushed out in red spurts.

Pounding feet sounded far down the dock. That pistol shot had aroused other traders who were loading furs directly in front of the fort, and they ran towards us.

That was when I lashed out at Dwyer. I don't think I ever hit a man so hard in all my life. I thought for a minute I'd broken my hand. He collapsed in a heap and I yelled at Kat:

"Into the canoe, Kat! Quick! All of you! Hurry, Wallie!"

My brother's answer spilled from his mouth. "No! I'd overload the canoe! I can hardly walk with this

sprained leg! Find Selkirk, Ronnie! Away you go! I'll be all right!"

I had no time to argue with him. He gave me a push. Kat's two companions were already in the canoe. I almost went through the birch-bark bottom of the craft. Kat tumbled in. The Ojibwas' paddles bit the water.

I grabbed another blade. Kat was in the stern. In a few seconds we were well out from the dock. A score of men now crowded around Dwyer. The crack of a pistol sounded across the water. Then a canoe shot out from the end of the wharf, then another and another.

I could feel the panic rising in my body. Our craft was overloaded with the four of us. It seemed to crawl.

"Head for the other bank, Kat!" I shouted, but he had already done that. The canoes behind were closing the gap. Bullets whizzed around our ears. Our canoe pushed its nose into the mud. We scrambled out. Kat snapped a word in Ojibwa which meant 'separate.' Our two loyal native friends melted into the bush like shadows.

Kat and I raced away, fleeing up the river bank just as the canoes of our pursuers rammed into the shore. We didn't talk. We just ran, scrambling over deadfalls, jamming through tangled vines like a couple of frightened deer, using every natural opening among the tree trunks as we sped up-river. Kat led the way, and he was like an antelope. I could hardly keep up with him.

I could hear the men coming after us. They were woodsmen too, and they weren't losing us, I can tell

you. My breath was coming in sobbing gulps and I was wondering how soon I'd slow down and be caught, when my eyes popped at the sight of a buckskin-clad figure who suddenly stepped out from behind a tree at the edge of a little clearing, and stood there, his musket ready for action.

My heart fell. He was a Nor'Wester I felt sure, because almost all the people around the Kaministikwia were working for the traders. How had this one managed to get ahead of us and cut us off? I was ready to drop. I could still hear the sound of breaking brush behind us. Our pursuers weren't far away now. Kat had stopped. I came up to him.

The big fellow stood there looking at us through cold eyes. He was one of the largest men I'd ever seen—well over six feet in height, and thick through the chest, with shoulders like a king buffalo.

"Where are you going?" he asked harshly.

"The Nor'Westers are after us," I puffed. "I suppose you're one of them . . ."

"I am not!" the man thundered. "This is Lord Selkirk's camp and I . . ."

Then a funny look came over him. He stared at me as if he'd seen a ghost, and his jaw dropped.

"You're . . . you're Scottish!" he stuttered.

I'd forgotten about my Indian outfit again! And no wonder, with everything that was going on. I could hardly believe my ears at what he had said first, though. Lord Selkirk's camp! I was at the big man's side in an instant, questions pouring from my mouth.

"When did the Earl get here? I must talk to him! Please! The Nor'Westers . . . I've heard . . ."

The voyageur's eyes left mine, peered over my shoulder, narrowed.

My brain was spinning with the sudden turn of events. A half dozen men had come up behind me. They were the ones who had been after Kat and me, all right. They stood sullenly eyeing us, their chests heaving. One of them spoke.

"We want those two. You'd better hand them over."

I hadn't noticed that the big man was in *front* of us now. His lips curled, and a shrill, piercing whistle sounded through the forest. Like magic, six or seven other men appeared from behind trees, and out of leafy clumps of foliage—huge, strapping fellows, each with a musket which swung down to his hips and covered the menacing Nor'Westers.

It was like a dream to me, but there it was in front of my eyes. The man by our side asked, "What have these Indians done?"

"Half murdered an innocent man . . ." the foremost of the traders started.

". . . and that one's not an Indian. He's white . . ." put in another, pointing at me.

"It was Dwyer I hit . . ." I interrupted.

"Who's Dwyer?" the big man asked.

"The man who's been helping the Nor'Westers against our colony."

He looked at me sharply. "Colony? What do you know about the colony?"

"I'm one of the settlers myself," I said proudly. "My name's Macmillan."

The voyageur straightened, and his eyes were hard as flint as he turned to the group of Nor'Westers who glared angrily at Kat and me.

"Get back to your fort!" he growled. "You'll lay not a hand on these boys. Quick, now! And don't come back!"

I looked at him in amazement. His eyes were snapping as they swung to me again.

"You must be the young one Miles Macdonell told us about!" His voice was friendly now.

I nodded eagerly. "He asked me to come to Fort William . . ." I began.

"You're made of good stuff, according to Macdonell. And what's this about the Nor'Westers? Tell me . . ."

"I'd rather tell the Earl himself."

"Come on, then. His Lordship knows about you, and he's been half expecting you would show up."

I followed him, with Kat at my heels. The Nor'Westers who'd been chasing us had disappeared down the river. I was quivering with expectation as our guide led us up the bank to an old clearing a few yards from the river. Three tents had been erected in the field, and a British flag fluttered atop a fresh-cut pole.

"Wait here a minute," the voyageur said. He strode to the largest tent and lifted the flap. He was out again almost at once. He beckoned us over. I found myself suddenly timid at meeting the great Selkirk about whom I had heard so much.

Kat said, "You go. Me wait."

I walked towards the tent. My knees were shaking. The voyageur stood aside. I entered. A tall, spare man, fully six feet in height, rose from a thong-tied bale on which he had been sitting. He had a pleasant face, with finely chiselled features, bright blue eyes, and his hair was sandy and thick.

"You . . . you're the Earl of Selkirk," I blurted, hardly realizing that at last I had reached the man who had done so much for our people, and whose work had been so harshly undone by the Nor'Westers.

The Earl laughed quietly, and spoke. His voice was soft and gentle, and full of kindness.

"And you must be Ronald Macmillan whom Miles Macdonell told me I would likely meet at Fort William. I am glad you found us. How did you learn that I was here?"

"I didn't know, sir," I replied, "until the Nor'-Westers chased us up the river where we met one of your guards."

"We arrived only last night," the Earl said thoughtfully. "I wonder if the Nor'Westers know that."

"They will now, sir," I volunteered.

He looked at me curiously. "Sit down, Ronald, and tell me how you come to be here." He indicated a stool, and then sat comfortably himself. The tent was simply furnished, with a rough table and a log chair behind it, a few stools, some bales, and a couch covered with beautiful red blankets. "Why were the traders chasing you?" he asked.

I told him about Wallie, and our encounter on the wharf. I finished with, "I'm glad I found your camp so soon, sir. I wanted to warn you . . ."

"Warn me? Against what, pray?"

I went on with the story Wallie had told me. The Earl didn't seem upset. He just nodded understandingly as I talked. Then he said, "We'll have to look into that," and started plying me with question after question about the colony and its people. He seemed more interested in that than in his own welfare. I told him all I knew, and then he asked about my own adventures, and I had to tell him all about what had happened to me. When he heard about Kat, he called him into the tent. It was dusk before we finished talking.

I've never met any man that I liked so well and so quickly. He made Kat and me feel right at home. In fact it seemed as if I'd known him all my life, and after I had repeated my warning I said impulsively, "I know the half-breeds, sir, and I'd like you to keep a sharp lookout for them. They'd kill you if they had a chance."

Lord Selkirk rubbed his chin thoughtfully and stood there looking at us as we rose together. His eyes twinkled as he said, "You have been living with the Ojibwas near the fort, so you tell me?"

"Yes, sir."

"You cannot go back there now."

I didn't say anything, although I wasn't looking forward to leaving the protection of Lord Selkirk's camp either. The Earl went on:

"I would be proud to have you the first Red River settler to accept the hospitality of my camp. Will you stay? You and Kat are most welcome."

I could almost feel Kat grinning in the dusk. He chuckled so loudly that Lord Selkirk burst out laughing at my companion's pleasure on hearing the invitation, and I said, "We'd be proud and pleased to stay, sir."

The Earl called the big voyageur into the tent, and I learned that the man's name was Charles Stuart. When Charles heard my story of the plot to attack Lord Selkirk, he said, "We'll post every man we've got, sir, but there are only ten of us. I wish Miles Macdonell would get here."

"Miles Macdonell?" I questioned.

"He's coming with our main party in a few days. We came on ahead of them."

"The Nor'Westers will know you are here now, sir . . ." I started.

"Yes, Ronald," the Earl replied.

"They might try tonight."

Lord Selkirk looked at me gravely. "It's unlikely, my lad. Besides, my men here can keep a close watch."

Sudden fear struck me that somehow the treacherous half-breeds might act quickly. I blurted, "These Métis are dangerous, sir. May . . . may Kat and I . . . we'd like to stand guard in your tent, sir . . . inside . . ."

The Earl smiled. He glanced at his voyageur chief. "What do you think, Charles?"

"I think it is a very good idea, my lord," Charles said grimly.

On the night of August 11, 1816, a courier arrived with a message telling us that Lord Selkirk's entire party had reached an island in Thunder Bay, and would move forward, up the Kaministikwia, tomorrow.

We breathed a little easier, knowing that over a hundred armed and trained men would join us within twenty-four hours. That night Kat and I took up our vigil in the tent of our good friend, the Earl of Selkirk. One of us stayed awake continually, sleeping only when the other was on watch.

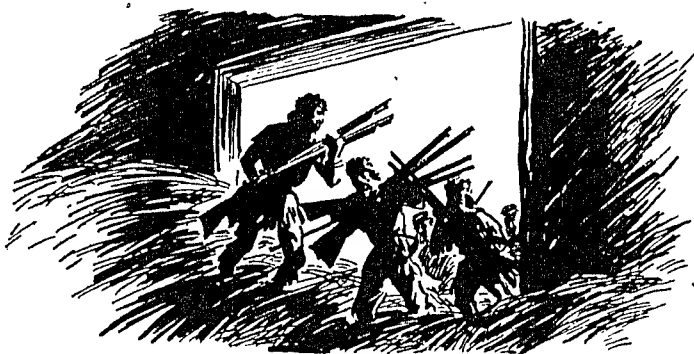
My turn came in the early hours of the morning. It was bright moonlight outside. The Earl slept on peacefully. Kat was asleep too, bundled in a blanket and lying across the door of the tent. I sat there in the semi-darkness, thinking about Father and Mother, and about Annette, and the good times we had all had on the Jack River.

Suddenly I heard a shout. The crack of a musket split the quiet night, and the sound of running feet reached my ears. Kat was scrambling up already, reaching for his knife as he pushed aside the tent flap. I stayed inside, every nerve in my body alert. Lord Selkirk stirred, then sat erect.

"What's the trouble, Ronnie?" he asked sleepily.

"I don't know, sir. I heard a shot, and somebody yelled. Kat's outside now . . ."

Just at that moment my Indian companion stuck his head in the tent and said, "One of our guards shoot at half-breed in bush. Man try to sneak up on us. Him gone now. Guard good shot!"



Chapter Twenty

ATTACK ON FORT DOUGLAS

WE DIDN'T sleep for the rest of that night. There wasn't a sign of any more intruders, but we were all sure that the dark figure which Charles had shot at was a Métis bent on attacking the Earl.

"The man was barely ten feet from your tent, sir, when I saw him," Charles told Lord Selkirk. "I think I nicked him. He disappeared in a hurry anyway."

"You scared him all right, Charles," put in another guard. "Look what I found in the brush where he was stopped. He must have dropped it."

The man handed across a gleaming knife. Lord Selkirk took it and looked at it. Then his eyes swung to me.

"These Nor'Westers are desperate men," he remarked quietly. He smiled to himself, but his eyes

were flashing. "Well," he continued, "we know now what we are up against."

It was full daylight as we talked in front of the Earl's tent. For the rest of the morning we kept a close watch on the river and on the trails. A little before noon I spied a big flotilla of boats coming up the Kaministikwia towards our camp, and there in the lead craft was Miles Macdonell, waving at Kat and me and the others who waited on the bank for his landing.

He singled me out as he clambered ashore. "Ronald!" he greeted me. "So you found the Earl's camp all right. I've been wondering about you and praying for your safety."

He hurried towards Lord Selkirk who stood looking down at us from the clearing. I glanced over the river. I'd never seen so many boats crowded together at one time before. There must have been nearly twenty of them, and they were filled with men and supplies. I half expected to see the de Meurons and the other soldiers comprising the party all decked out in their colourful uniforms, but they weren't. They wore coarse homespuns and jackets, and some even had buckskin coats.

But their clothes couldn't belie the fact that they were well trained and well disciplined. There was a military look about them and their movements. They swarmed ashore. Tents appeared, filled the clearing in orderly rows, spilled over into the glades along the river. I was able to count more than a hundred men with us now.

In less than an hour the camp took on the appearance of a trim, well-arranged army bivouac. Fires were going, and pots bubbled merrily as the men made ready their first meal in Lord Selkirk's Kaministikwia stopping-place. The bush was filled with the murmur of their voices, and I detected strange words in the low babble. The de Meurons, I found out, were talking in their native French-Swiss.

About one o'clock Macdonell sought me out. Kat and I were cutting firewood when he came up to us. Charles was with him.

"Ronald," he started, "we've decided that you and Kat should act as the Earl's personal bodyguard. Will you take over at his tent at once?"

There was just a wisp of a grin on his face, and the thrill of pleasure I felt must have showed in my eyes for he said, "Aye, I knew you'd like that, and it's an honour, too."

Kat said, "Me get musket with knife on end?"

Charles roared. "You shall have a musket and bayonet! The best in camp!"

Kat's sudden yell of delight rolled across the forest like the shriek of a banshee, and I caught sight of two startled soldiers a short distance away jumping to their guns which they had leaned against a stump, while they, too, cut wood for the camp fires.

Kat was all grins as we took up our places in front of Lord Selkirk's tent. At last he had a gun with a 'knife on end', as he called it, and he strutted up and down, proud as a peacock.

The Earl didn't waste any time. A few minutes after we'd been posted on guard duty, Charles and a young officer by the name of d'Orsonnens hurried down the river with a few men. They were back in a couple of hours, their big boat laden with people. I looked down to the river bank from my vantage point in front of the Earl's tent. Suddenly a familiar figure scrambled ashore. It was Wallie!

I almost dropped my gun and ran to him, but I remembered in time that my job was right where I stood. I saw Miles Macdonell speak to Wallie. My brother's head snapped in my direction and I could see the pleasure on his face even at that distance. He limped up the path towards me. "Ronnie!" he greeted me. "So you got away from the traders all right! Thank God you did."

I looked at the men straggling up from the boat. "Who's with you, Wallie . . ." I began.

"Released prisoners from Fort William. Four of them are colonists and the others Hudson's Bay men the traders have been holding."

Just then Miles Macdonell, who had entered the Earl's tent came out. "His Lordship wants to talk to all of you who have been held at Fort William. Will you come inside, one at a time, please? How about you first, Wallie?"

It was evening before the Earl had finished questioning the men whom the Nor'Westers had surrendered. I couldn't help hearing what was said inside the tent, and it was a pretty grim story the released captives told

—trumped up charges, ambushes, and even cruelty. One of the captured colonists, John Bourke, had been forced to make the trip from the Red manacled, despite the severe wounds which he had suffered in the fight near the clump of oak trees north of the Settlement.

Kat and I were relieved of our duty at dark, and a half dozen husky men from the old Glengarry Fencibles took our places for the night, forming a six-man ring around the Earl's tent.

Kat and I, with Wallie, Charles, and one or two others sat in front of a camp fire that night while my brother told us what had happened back on the Red. It wasn't a nice story. A short time before the massacre, Governor Semple had dismantled old Fort Gibraltar, and had used the materials to build new cabins for the settlers.

The half-breeds from the Qu'Appelle country had swept down on the colony, and Governor Semple had gone out to meet them with a handful of men. In the fight that followed, twenty-two of the colonists had been slaughtered. Only a couple of the party got away, one of them, John Bourke.

"The 'breeds threatened to fire Fort Douglas, and put everyone in it to death if we didn't give up the post at once," Wallie concluded bitterly, "so we all started back to the old Jack River encampment. The Nor'-Westers stopped us on the Red River though, and myself and four others were taken prisoner, and brought to Fort William. Why, I'll never figure out."

"Father, Mother . . ." I started.

"All our folks are safe and sound, Ronnie. And we built a new cabin last fall, right on the same spot as the old one. I hope it's not burned down by this time."

I awakened the next morning with a strange sound in my ears. It was a bugle, shrilly calling reveille in clear, piercing notes which sent scolding jays chattering through the forest.

Kat and I took up our posts again. I could sense an air of excitement in the camp this morning. I soon found out why. Before the day was out, our men had brought nine Nor'West wintering partners from Fort William to Lord Selkirk's tent—but only after a fight at the gates, and a tussle with two of the partners themselves. Kat and I heard the far off shouts and musket fire as we paced up and down in front of the Earl's canvas headquarters.

Lord Selkirk let the partners go back to the fort in the late afternoon. I heard them all promise good behaviour, and out they trooped, looking pretty mad—and dejected, too. The Earl followed them. When they had departed in one of the big boats, he turned to Kat and me.

"You have been on duty pretty steadily, my lads," he said heartily. "You had better have some relief." He swung to a soldier who stood nearby. "Here, François, take over sentry duty in place of these two Ojibwas."

The man grinned widely, and Lord Selkirk smiled, as François took our places. Kat and I made for the river. The boat with the nine Nor'West partners was out of

sight. A canoe, with paddles still in it, lay on the bank. I looked at Kat. He must have read my thoughts.

"Me like go my people," he grinned. That was as good an excuse as any to get down near the fort and see what was going on. We were in the canoe in a jiffy, paddling furiously down river. We landed near the gate and scurried along to a sheltered spot near the wall, just in time to see the larger, slower boat with the nine Nor'West partners draw up to the wharf and discharge its passengers. The men trooped inside the fort.

At that moment a familiar figure strode out across the wharf, followed by several Indians and half-breeds who carried supplies. It was Tom Dwyer, and he seemed in a hurry. Four more men came along, lugging a big voyageur canoe. They slipped it into the water, and the servants piled in the baggage. Then the crew of voyageurs took their places in the canoe while Dwyer settled himself in the middle. The craft moved off, down the river. I could see they were expecting a long voyage, for their canoe was laden to the gunwales. I didn't know at that moment where they were going, but later I found out to my sorrow that they were headed west to the Red.

Then the gates of the fort clanged shut. We went over to the Ojibwa encampment where Kat's people plied us with questions. We decided to stay with our Ojibwa friends until next morning. That night I couldn't sleep, in spite of the fact that I was exhausted by the happenings of the last few days.

It must have been after midnight when I quietly slipped out of the encampment and wandered down towards the fort. It was a crazy thing to do, I know, but I couldn't shake the fear that the Nor'Westers would attempt to thwart Lord Selkirk.

I walked along through the moonlight, with no particular destination in mind. There was an old barn outside the fort walls, and before I realized it I was within a few yards of its weather-beaten side. Suddenly I heard low voices and the faint scuffle of working men.

I fell on my stomach and wormed my way towards the building. When I was close enough to hear what was going on, I grimly realized that my fears concerning the Nor'Westers had been well founded. I heard a voice say, "Put the fowling-pieces and guns under the hay. They'll never find them there."

Men filed back and forth from the fort. Then another voice said, "Take those barrels of gunpowder to the swamp up at the north edge of the gardens. There isn't room for them here."

For an hour I lay there, shivering on the cold earth, knowing that I had inadvertently discovered that the Nor'Westers were hiding their arms. I inched back, returned to the Ojibwa encampment and quietly rolled in a blanket, anxiously awaiting daylight. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew Kat was shaking me. I sat bolt upright.

I told Kat what I had discovered the night before and finished with, "Let's get over to Lord Selkirk's camp right away!"

It was still early morning when we hurried back and told our story. Lord Selkirk's face hardened as I talked. When I was through, he just nodded.

"I should have known it," he replied thoughtfully. "Well, fire must be fought with fire." He rose to his feet and went outside. I heard him shout, "Macdonell! Come here, please."

That day Lord Selkirk's soldiers occupied Fort William.

The nine Nor'West partners were imprisoned. We gathered up the arms and gunpowder which the traders had attempted to hide. The French-Canadians, Bois-Brûlés, and Indians in the service of the North-West Company were ordered across the river. Their canoes were then confiscated. Selkirk's force broke camp on the Kaministiquia and moved to the fort. On August 18, the nine partners were sent to York in Upper Canada, under a strong guard, while Lord Selkirk held sway over the former North-West post and ruled it with an iron hand. I often thought of Miles Macdonell's words when he had said, "... when he's aroused he can be a terror!"

I began to worry about my family, who were still up at Jack River as far as I knew. I was fully aware that each passing day made more remote my chances of returning to the Red before winter.

A short time after the Nor'West partners had been sent east, an Indian returned with the news that the flotilla on the way to York had met with an accident at the Isle aux Erables near Sault Ste. Marie, and that

several of the party had drowned, among them Kenneth M'Kenzie, one of the chief partners.

Lord Selkirk was very upset, but he carried on with his plans. I had given up all hope by now of getting back to the Red before the spring of 1817. The berry stain wore off my face as the days passed, but I still wore my buckskins.

We spent the winter at Fort William. Lord Selkirk wasn't idle. He sent out expeditions which captured and manned the North-West posts of Rainy Lake, Michipicoten, and Fond du Lac, down at the tip of Lake Superior. In March, 1817, he gathered together a band of his seasoned campaigners. They were assembled in the old Great Hall of the Nor'Westers, and as he talked my mind went back to the first time I was ever in this famous room. The marble bust of Simon McTavish looked down on us, and I thought somehow I could detect a look of sadness and frustration on the replica of this sturdy old trader as it scowled over the men who were ruining his wilderness empire.

Lord Selkirk looked thin and worn as he addressed us from the dais at the end of the room. You could hear a pin drop while he talked.

"—and it is now March. It is early for travelling, I know, but I am going to ask you to start for the Red at once. I will follow with the rest of our men as soon as the ice is out."

He paused, and his eyes sought out Kat and me. He hurried on. "Most of you have never been to Fort Douglas, but Captain Miles Macdonell will be in charge

of your party, and you will have two experienced woodsmen with you—Ronald Macmillan and his Ojibwa friend, Kat. They will be a great help, for they know the district around the fort very well, and you will find them useful guides. Try to avoid further bloodshed if possible. But *take Fort Douglas*, no matter how you do it!”

A thrill of pleasure swept over me at the Earl's words. Back to the Red! I could hardly contain myself. The next few days were filled with bustle and rush as we prepared for the journey. Kat made us each a new pair of sturdy buckskin moccasins, and he and I were ready well before the rest. Wallie couldn't go. His sprained leg was troubling him, and he still limped a little.

It was about mid-March when we started. That walk from Fort William to the Red was the longest I've ever made, before or since.

We stuck to the rivers and lakes, just as we would have if we had been travelling in canoes, but we didn't go away north down the Winnipeg River. We cut directly across country from the Lake of the Woods, after I had suggested to Miles Macdonell that we would add to the surprise of our attack on the Nor'Westers in Fort Douglas if we approached the fort from the south.

“A capital idea!” Miles exclaimed when I mentioned it to him. “We'll do it.”

Charles, the voyageur, headed up the long file of men as we plodded through the bush on snowshoes.

He set a stiff pace for all of us. We were heavily laden. Even Miles Macdonell carried forty or fifty pounds of supplies, as well as arms, powder, and balls. Kat helped break trail. There was plenty of game along the way, and our night camps were jolly, even if they were crude, with singing soldiers around the fires, and pots boiling merrily in the frosty air. We made huge lean-tos at each stop, falling trees in such a way that they 'hung up' in nearby branches, then built our fires right inside the shelters.

The old soldiers yarned for hours, and I heard wild tales of their campaigns against Napoleon, of their stay on Malta, and of their lately completed battles in the War against the United States. They were a fine lot, well disciplined, eager to get on to the Red, settle with the Nor'Westers, and get busy working the land.

It was well on in April when we neared Fort Douglas. We had cut poles and made ladders to scale the walls, and this night when we approached the fort, a spring snowstorm rode the darkness on a howling wind.

"'Tis a good night to surprise them," Macdonell told us as we gathered for final instructions. "Be quiet. Get over the palisades and into the buildings as quickly as you can. At this hour they'll most likely all be in bed."

In the early morning we crossed the prairies towards Fort Douglas. The new fort was located north of my father's land, and looked down over the Red almost at the point where the river curled round to make Point Douglas. The wet snow clung to our clothes, blending

us with the white mantle which covered the ground.

Quietly the crude ladders were leaned against the palisades. The first man up gently lowered another ladder on the inside. In a few minutes a dozen precarious, pole trails led over the pickets and into the compound.

With muskets unslung and hands bare, the men started over the walls. I was first up our ladder, with Kat immediately behind me. When I got to the top, I saw that I was quite close to a building at the rear of the fort. I had barely reached the bottom rung on the inside when a startled shout sounded from across the compound. I ran for the cabin. I could hear the sounds of waking men inside. I kicked the door open.

Without warning a gun went off in the darkness, and it suddenly seemed that someone had stabbed me in the thigh with a hot branding iron.



Chapter Twenty-One

AMBUSHED

I SPUN under the impact of the bullet. The next thing I knew I was lying on the snow-covered ground, and Kat was bending over me and saying, "You hit! You no move!"

I struggled. It felt as if someone had a red hot poker stuck in my hip and was twisting it savagely. Men's feet pounded past my ears as our soldiers poured into the buildings. There wasn't much of a fight. We'd caught the Bois-Brûlés almost completely off guard. By the time Kat had made a crude stretcher out of a couple of overcoats and two slim poles, every Métis in the place had given up.

Kat and Charles carried me inside a big house near the gates. This was the first time I had seen Fort Douglas, as it was called, but I was in no condition to

pay attention to my surroundings. Surgeon M'Master, who had travelled with us, slit my pants and fussed around with hot water and bandages. Presently I began to feel a little better. Miles Macdonell looked on anxiously. I was the only casualty of the entire raid.

"Lucky that ball wasn't an inch to the right," he remarked, "or it would have shattered your hip bone. It's a clean wound, Ronnie. You'll be up and around in a couple of weeks."

A couple of weeks! I groaned. There was so much I wanted to do, and so many things I wanted to see. I was promptly put to bed and Kat said, "Me stay in here with you. You need me, you call."

Good old faithful Kat! I was glad he did stay, for before the night was out, that hip of mine was aching like fury. In the morning it seemed even worse. The next couple of days were pretty bad ones for me, and when I slept fitfully and moved without realizing it, the pain of my wound caused me to cry out without my knowing it, and I would wake up to find Kat gently holding me quiet.

I healed quickly, though, and soon began to get my appetite back, but it was a full two weeks before the surgeon would let me stand up. Kat brought me all the news.

Every time he came to see me while I was convalescing he would have something to tell me—"I go see your new cabin. It not hurt. It dirty but all right." And, "All soldiers work hard. Get ready for planting." Again he would say, "Me fix fence around Big Mac-

millan's garden," or, "My father come see you soon. He send you this—" and he would hold up a thick, juicy buffalo steak, or a tender prairie chicken, or a plump fish—the golden-eyed kind I liked so much.

It was the first week in May, 1817, when I limped unsteadily towards our new cabin to the south of Fort Douglas. Old familiar spots kept my eyes dancing. The road was just the same, and when I caught sight of the new home Dad and Wallie had built, I didn't know whether I wanted to laugh or cry, I was so happy. I leaned on the fence around Father's big garden, and rested. I could see where Kat had fitted fresh rails into the criss-cross barrier of logs.

I went inside the house. It was dust-covered and bleak, but it was unharmed. It was just the same as the one which had been burned, and stood on the same spot. Father, Mother, Annette, and my other friends were constantly in my mind. I could picture them around me, their broad, cheery voices filling the room with friendly words. I was tired. I lay down on a bunk and rested, gazing up at the log beams of the ceiling. Outside the sounds of spring were the only signs of life—the cheep of birds, the far off low of a cow, the pleasant rustle of fresh leaves. I fell asleep, home at last.

When I got back to Fort Douglas where Kat had been asking everybody where I had gone, it was early evening.

For the last week I had been urging Charles to set out for the North to bring back our people, but he had decided to wait until he and his men had had a chance

to put all the cabins in good shape and build some new ones. That visit to *our* cabin had settled one thing in my mind. I was going north to Jack River, whether the voyageurs would go or not! I simply couldn't wait another minute to be on my way to see our people. Injury or no injury, I determined to set out just as soon as I could properly wield a paddle.

Macdonell was coming out of the gate as I went in. He said, "Where did *you* get to all day?"

"I've been to see our cabin."

"Is it all right?"

"Yes. But it lacks one thing."

"What's that?"

"The people who built it, sir!"

With sudden resolve I said, "I'm going north the minute this bothersome leg stops hurting me. And it doesn't feel too bad right now, even after my long walk."

He grinned. "When do you propose starting?"

"Today is Wednesday. Monday morning—I'm sure I'll be fit by then."

Macdonell stood there with his hands on his hips. "An Indian woods runner arrived at the Fort while you were away. He's from Lord Selkirk's party. The Earl will be here within ten days!"

"Selkirk's coming?"

Macdonell nodded, his eyes sparkling gleefully. "And I'll send the York boats up after the settlers on Monday, too," he went on excitedly. "Then you'll have company."

If I could have danced up and down, I would have. "We've got things in not too bad shape for our people,"

Macdonell continued, "and I know the Earl will want the colonists back as soon as possible. Yes, Monday it is."

"I'm the only one here with kin at the Jack River," I remarked. "It will be wonderful to see them again."

Charles, the big voyageur, had joined us. When I said that, he grinned broadly. "Kin? And you would be anxious about Annette, too, wouldn't you, lad?"

My mouth fell open. "Annette? How did you—"

"Kat," he said, "has already told me that you and he would probably start north as soon as you could walk properly. That Indian lad is a smart one. He said to me, 'Ron-ee, him have girl he like up there. Her name—Annette.'"

I could feel the crimson in my face as Charles went on cheerily, "Aye, lad, I know what it's like to be young. You can lead the flotilla if you like."

He slapped me on the back and moved off with Macdonell, while I stood there tongue-tied. As I walked slowly towards my quarters, I had to admit to myself that I *did* want to see Annette again, just as badly as I wanted to see my father and mother.

Daylight the following Monday brought great activity down on the river in front of Fort Douglas. Several big York boats had been loaded the night before and lay nosed into the muddy banks. Men scurried between the river and the fort making last minute preparations for the trip. Just then we discovered something that changed our plans. One of the York boats had been heavily loaded with food, and for some reason

had sprung a leak in the night. There was six inches of water in it when we came down Monday morning. Charles had no alternative but to unload it and caulk the bottom with pitch. There wasn't another boat available.

Meanwhile Kat and I were simply itching to be away. I couldn't lift much with my bad leg, and when I saw what had occurred I said to Charles, "How long will it take to fix the leak?"

"Two or three hours, at least." He was annoyed at the delay, and continued, "If you and Kat would like to go ahead, it will be all right. We'll catch up with you tonight down the river. Built a good, big fire when you camp so we can see it. We'll join you."

We left while the Red was still shrouded in mist. It was an eerie feeling to be on the water in the cold fog, but we weren't under way long before the rising sun dispelled the enveloping greyness around us. We paddled along, paying little attention to anything in particular, least of all to the thought that any of our enemies, the Nor'Westers, might *still* be in the neighbourhood.

Fort Douglas was about twenty-five or thirty miles behind us when we swung in close to the east bank of the Red, looking for a good place to camp. It was early evening. We had not rushed too much, knowing that the York boats would likely be behind.

Suddenly a canoe shot out from a leafy baylet, almost ramming us. I leaned on my paddle, yelling to the occupants of the other craft to veer off, but on it came.

I choked when the figure in the bow swung a pistol towards me. It was a sickening feeling to realize that we had been so careless, for the man who leered across the few feet of water was Tom Dwyer! With him were five other men. Two of them were white and the other three Bois-Brûlés.

I almost jumped out of my skin at the sight of one of the half-breeds. The man's face was marked by a livid scar that ran from his nose right across his cheek! A day long ago flashed across my memory, when Kat and I had stood in our coulee hideaway near the colony and two half-breeds had threatened us from across the narrow creek. I peered at the Métis. There was no doubt in my mind. This was the same man!

"Pull into the bank!" Dwyer barked.

We had no choice. The two whites also produced pistols. We landed. Dwyer spoke again.

"Well, Macmillan. You were a long time getting here."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The Nor'West partner at Bas-de-la-Rivière posted me and my friends to let him know when your Selkirk voyageurs got on their way north to Jack River. It's a pleasant surprise to find you and this Indian alone."

My mind raced. He didn't know that Charles and his party were following! I said quickly, "I'm on my way to see my people—and your people, Dwyer, too, if you'd only realize it."

A shadow of annoyance crossed his face. He swung to one of his white companions.

"Tie them up," he ordered.

They trussed Kat and me, and left us sitting on the bank while the men made their night camp. Charles's words chased through my brain as I sat there . . . "build a good big fire so we can see it." I could feel my stomach tighten as the minutes passed, and the sun sank below the trees. There was still a chance, just a chance that Charles *might* have started soon enough and that he might see Dwyer's fire—if the man built one.

Our captors gave us some pemmican, bannocks, and tea for supper. It was almost dark, and I was so tense and so keyed up, I thought sure Dwyer would notice me. After we had eaten, the men began piling long dry logs on the small cooking fire which had been used, and in a short time there was a dandy blaze going full blast.

I could feel the sweat running down my sides as I waited, my ears straining for some sound from the river.

Nothing happened.

Dwyer and his companions sat around the fire, and then one of the men produced a flagon of rum. Before long they were talking loudly and boastfully.

I said to Dwyer, "What are you going to do with us?"

They'd almost forgotten Kat and me in their carousing, I think, because Dwyer said, "Oh! So you've finally decided to talk. Well, we're going to take you to Bas-de-la-Rivière, and then ship you to Montreal for trial."

"Trial?"

"For your part in the robbery of Fort La Souris. Remember?"

"That's nonsense!" I exploded. "You kidnapped me. You've murdered and abused our people. Tom Dwyer, I can't understand how you can—"

I didn't finish. He suddenly reached over and slapped me full across the mouth. I could see a change in Dwyer. He didn't seem to want to hear about his early connection with our people. The scarred Bois-Brûlé beside him spoke.

"Me kill your people," he boasted in a maudlin, growling voice. "Me kill Semple. Me bad."

Dwyer cut in. "We mean business, Macmillan. There's a strong party of men at Bas-de-la-Rivière. If your people had weakened themselves by sending a large party north instead of just you two, we would have taken a try at Fort Douglas ourselves. But you'll do as a prize."

I wasn't listening to him. I stared at the disfigured half-breed who sat weaving in front of the fire.

"What does he mean—he killed Semple?" I asked.

"Pierre, here, was in the fight on Frog Plain. Semple was wounded first, you know. This patriot finished the rascal off—and a good job, too, I'd say."

Pierre! I was right! I remembered the name I'd heard years ago back in that coulee!

Dwyer went on: "Show him, Pierre, how good a shot you are, just in case he's thinking of making a break for it!"

I watched the fierce-looking half-breed scramble to his feet, and haul a pistol from the faded sash at his waist. The man weaved into the bushes, and slipped a little

square of white birch bark into a crevice in a tree some distance away. I could hardly see it in the firelight. Then he stood back, aimed, fired. The blast of his gun sounded loudly in the still night air. The insignificant white square disappeared. He sat down proudly.

"See what I mean?" Dwyer remarked.

I looked at both of them and grinned sourly. I'd almost given up hope that Charles had managed to get under way soon enough to catch up with us, but I knew that shot could be heard for miles around. The fire was still sending long tongues of orange into the air, and the shadows were dancing on the trees around us when from those shadows, and into the firelight, stepped fifteen or twenty men, each with a pistol. It happened just as I tell it. There was no noise, no warning.

I heard Charles's voice say, "Stay where you are, everybody! Don't move!"

Dwyer's head snapped up. There wasn't any too much light around the now-dying fire, so I suppose he thought he might have a chance if he ran for it. He rolled suddenly, over a log and into the brush. Pierre, the half-breed marksman, dived the other way, and the next second the crack of pistols rolled over the silent river like waves over a reef.

I threw myself to the ground to escape the cross fire. I caught a glimpse of Pierre, the scarred Métis, as he rolled into the brush and disappeared. I thought Dwyer had gone, too, until I poked my head up. There he was right above me, carefully aiming his pistol straight at my face!



Chapter Twenty-Two

PLOT OF A TRAITOR

THE BLAST of another pistol behind my head mingled with the flash of Dwyer's weapon. His bullet fanned my face. He twisted unnaturally, and collapsed to the ground. I heard Charles say, "That will keep *him* quiet for a while."

The voyageur's knife whipped out and in a moment I was free again. Another of our men quickly severed Kat's bonds.

"That rascal almost had you, Ronnie," Charles growled. "Who is he?"

"Dwyer," I answered shakily.

"Dwyer!" the voyageur barked. "So we've got him at last! He looks as if he might be badly hit. Let's see."

We knelt beside the man whose loyalty had been bought with Nor'West dollars. His face was ashen.

Charles's bullet had caught him below the right shoulder. The voyageur looked at me.

"He might get over that one, worse luck!" Charles said shortly.

The two scared whites who had been with Dwyer were led into the firelight. Two frightened half-breeds cringed under the muzzles of our men's pistols. There was no sign of Pierre.

Charles said to one of his men, "Did you get them all?"

"All but one," the man answered, "and he got clean away."

Dwyer stirred at my feet. I looked down. The man's lips curled. I bent low. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "So . . . you . . . you . . . tricked us, Macmillan. You . . . won't trick Pierre. You'll never stop him in time . . . never . . ."

His head flopped. Charles touched me on the shoulder. "Let me get at him, Ronnie. I'll patch him up."

What had Dwyer meant? All the rest of the evening those whispered words repeated themselves in my mind: "*You'll never stop him in time . . . in time . . . in time . . .*" Charles had discovered that Dwyer had a pistol ball lodged deep in his shoulder. The man certainly wouldn't stand the trip to Jack River and back, that was certain. The other four were trussed up to nearby trees. Dwyer was made comfortable, and Charles's voyageurs were rolling themselves in their blankets when my friend said to me, "Sit down by the fire here a minute, Ronnie. I want to talk to you."

I looked at him queerly. He knocked the ashes from his pipe and went on:

"I've been thinking. We can't carry Dwyer on to the North. That would be as good as shooting him on the spot." He peered at me with narrowed eyes. "I'll take the others along as prisoners."

"What are we going to do with him?" I asked.

"He'll have to be taken back to the Fort tonight . . . or he'll likely die." His eyes bored into mine. "I don't want to delay our journey to Jack River. Will you take Dwyer to Fort Douglas? I'll need every voyageur I have if we strike rough weather on the lake."

I didn't know what to say. Kat, who squatted beside me, growled bluntly, "Him bad. Why you try make better?"

Charles frowned. "Kat, after a man has stopped a bullet he's just another man—not an enemy."

I looked at Dwyer, who lay close to the fire, not moving a muscle, his face pale and drawn and his eyes tight shut. I nodded slowly.

"If you think that's the thing to do, I'll start now."

"Me go, too," Kat added quickly.

We cleared the centre of our canoe and spread blankets over a mattress of spruce branches, then gently carried the unconscious form of Dwyer down the rocky slope and eased him into the craft. Kat took the bow and I the stern. As I climbed in Charles said, "You can still come along to Jack River, you know. But with that weak leg of yours you might have trouble catching up with us. Use your own judgment."

The light of the fire cast a faint, eerie glow over the riverside. The water smelled of the earth which muddied its flow, and the pleasant aroma of wood smoke from our fire perfumed the air as we swung out into the stream and headed south, up the river, back to Fort Douglas.

We got there at daylight the next morning. I was pretty tired after being up twenty-four hours. My leg had started to ache like fury, and as soon as we had Dwyer safely in the hands of the surgeon, Kat and I rolled into bed and fell asleep instantly.

The evening sun was sending long shadows across the earth when I awoke. I was stiff and sore after my paddle. Kat had already arisen and I was alone. I was just hauling on my buckskins when Miles Macdonell came in.

"The doctor wants to see you as soon as you're dressed," he told me. "He's in his office."

When I hurried into the dispensary a few minutes later, Surgeon M'Master's eyes were serious.

"I'm afraid Dwyer is in far worse condition than you or Charles thought," he told me. "The man's been asking for you all day. He mightn't last the night. Do you want to talk to him?"

Did I want to talk to him? I should say I did! That warning of his still stuck in my mind. I followed the surgeon. He led me down a dark hall to the end room. I could hear mumblings inside. An Indian woman who had been watching Dwyer for the doctor, scurried out as we went in. The wounded man was in bed. He

looked different, somehow, than I had ever seen him before. Oh, I realized he was hurt and suffering, but this was something else. I didn't understand what it was then, but I've seen men die before and since, and the look Dwyer had was the amazement which so often shows on men's faces when they know they are about to meet their Maker.

I sat down on a rough chair beside him. He was fighting for his breath, and I could hear a rattle as he struggled to keep his lungs full of life-giving air. The doctor went out.

Dwyer's head swung towards me, and his eyes widened unnaturally as they focused on my face. He clutched my hand, and his grip was like iron.

"Macmillan . . . Macmillan. I had to . . . to see you before . . . before . . ." He choked and I thought he'd gone. But he struggled on. "You . . . you . . . brought me here to try and save me . . . after . . . after all the things I've done to you. I . . . I'm sorry, Macmillan. Please believe me . . ."

He stared up at me, his eyes bright and feverish. "We know . . . Selkirk's coming to the Red. Pierre . . . the 'breed who got away he . . . he . . ."

I could hear my heart pounding under my jacket. I leaned close.

"Yes, Dwyer," I encouraged, "go on . . . please go on."

The man's voice sank to a scarcely discernible whisper. "He's . . . going to try to kill Selkirk . . . Stop him, Ronnie . . . save . . . save . . ."

His head lolled and he went limp. I would learn no more from him. The doctor came to the door just then, frowned, and strode to Dwyer's bedside.

"You'd better get out, Macmillan," he said gruffly. "Perhaps I should have awakened you earlier."

He looked at me. I guess I was shaking, for he said, "Have something to eat and get back to bed. I'm afraid you've overdone it with that long paddle. Your leg's not entirely better yet, I see."

"I . . . I'm all right," I said hurriedly. "But this sort of thing . . ."

"I know. But I can't think of a rascal who deserves it any more than this one."

A hundred thoughts chased through my mind. It was on the verge of my tongue to raise an alarm right on the spot, but I held that impulse in check. I started searching for Kat, and found him in the mess hall of the Fort. He looked at me and said, "You not well, Ron-ee?"

"Come along outside, Kat," I answered.

When we were in the compound, and alone, I told him what I had learned. He grunted as he always did when something displeased him.

"You tell soldiers? You tell Macdonell?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Maybe better not, eh?"

"Why?"

"Bad half-breed. Him maybe have friends here some place. We not know. You tell, then everybody know. Friends tell bad half-breed. Him much careful. You

not tell, him not know. Maybe we catch him."

"I think you're right, Kat," I said. "We'll wait till the Earl gets here before we mention it to anyone."

I'd given up all hope of joining Charles and his flotilla, but I didn't worry because I knew he'd look after my people as well, or even better than I. Kat and I carried our secret around with us for almost a week, before a great company of canoes swept in from the north, and once more I saw a tall, smiling man with reddish hair, and a quiet, refined face—Lord Selkirk, whose safety chance had put in my hands.

I wondered how he felt as he looked across his land for the first time, the rich, heavy soil which had been his dream and his passion for years. There wasn't much fuss when he arrived. There were only about twenty of us at Fort Douglas, and we all trooped down to the bank of the river to meet him.

He picked me out among the first, shook my hand and said, "It's good to see you again, Ronnie. And it's good to be here on the Red at last."

I knew the Earl would have plenty to do, so I replied quickly, "Thank you, sir. And . . . I'd like to see you in private as soon as possible, Lord Selkirk."

He looked at me queerly. There were others right at our elbow. His eyebrows raised in question. "More trouble?" he asked.

"More trouble," I repeated.

Just at that moment a tall figure swept over me, and there was Wallie, his arms around my shoulders and his face so happy that I gulped in spite of myself.

"We're home at last, Ronnie!" he said hoarsely.
"Home at last!"

I looked at him. He was thin and wan. I hurried to question him.

"Your leg . . . you look peaked . . ."

He grinned. "It kept getting steadily worse until a couple of nights ago the surgeon opened it and now it's getting better. I'll have to stay quiet for a couple of weeks, but it'll be all right now."

He was still limping. I helped him up to the Fort, and we put him to bed in the same room I'd used when I had been hit.

I didn't have a chance to talk to the Earl again until that night. He spent the day looking over the Fort, inspecting every room, fondly gazing at the handiwork of his people. He went out into the fields, and to the deserted cabins of the settlers, and once I saw him bend down and scoop up a handful of soil, and let it sift through his fingers, back to the earth again.

In the evening his aide asked Kat and me to come into the office, the same one, I was told, that Governor Semple used to occupy. It was early the next morning before we tumbled into bed—tired, bewildered, and in many ways, happy and excited.

I learned that night what a terrific struggle Lord Selkirk was having to carry out his colonization plans. The Nor'Westers were immensely strong; their political influence was great, and our benefactor got all too little support from the courts and the leaders of both Upper and Lower Canada.

When I told him about Pierre, and what Dwyer had divulged he smiled grimly and said, "You seem to be in the right place at the right time, don't you Macmillan?"

"I haven't mentioned this to anyone except Kat, sir," I told Lork Selkirk. And then I explained why. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You may be right, Ronnie. And I think we'll leave the matter like that, too. If this fellow, Pierre, thinks we know nothing of his plan, the more confident he'll be, and the easier he'll be to catch."

The Earl put his hand on my shoulder and went on: "I'd like you and Kat to take up your old duties, though. Then I'm sure I'll be all right. And I'll keep *my* eyes open, too."

That was how I came to be with Lord Selkirk constantly for the next ten days. Kat and I took turns again, just as we did back on the banks of the Kaministikwia. We never let His Lordship out of our sight.

I began to get a little jumpy after a few days of it. I knew that somewhere, crouched in the brush, or sidling through the dark was a Métis who had already killed Governor Semple, and who had been given the task of removing the man in whose hands lay the destiny of our people. Besides that, I liked Lord Selkirk. He was just like one of ourselves. Indeed, he *was* one of us!

I quietly arranged with the gate guards to keep every Métis out of the fort, friendly or not. When Lord Selkirk went afield, Kat and I watched him like a hawk, and Kat pressed a dozen or so of his tribe into service to scout at each side when the Earl went walking.

They beat every clump of brush within musket range, and I often wondered what the Earl thought when he saw the same Indians nearby every time he left the Fort. He didn't say anything about it until one day when I had taken him south to show him my father's new cabin.

He looked around inside, while I proudly showed him our home-made furniture, and the scraped skin panes, and the sturdy stone fireplace.

"These Indians," he said, "they seem to be all over the place, Ronnie. Do you know them?"

I grinned and looked at Kat. "They my people. They much like you. No want half-breed near," my Indian companion replied. "They know plenty about bush. Nobody hide from them."

The Earl nodded. "I see. I see," he reflected. He was wearing two beautiful rings with wide bands, and each had a dark, rich stone in the centre. Suddenly he pulled them off.

"Come here, you two," he said gravely.

Kat and I came close. Lord Selkirk's eyes were bright as he went on, "I want both of you to take these tokens. They were given to me by my father back on St. Mary's Isle at the mouth of the River Dee in Kirkcudbrightshire in Scotland. They were worn in battle by Sir James Douglas in the days of Bruce, and no ancestor of mine was ever more loyal and courageous than you, Ronnie, and you, my good friend Kat."

He bowed gravely while Kat and I stood there pleased and surprised, and so grateful that we couldn't speak.

I was choked, and Kat, for the first time under any circumstances, didn't grunt. He just looked at Lord Selkirk with glistening eyes, and his black head dropped as he bowed his thanks.

On the way back to Fort Douglas, my mind was filled with thoughts of my people again, and of Annette, for the sight of our home had stirred up longings which had been pushed aside in the duties with which I had been entrusted for the past few days.

When we neared the gate, I saw a huge figure hurry out towards us. I went on ahead of his Lordship, for Pierre, the Métis, was a big man, and this might be a bold affront by the half-breed to carry out his threat. It only took a few seconds to see who it was, and when I recognized him, I yelled in spite of myself.

It was Charles, the big voyageur! He was back again!

He gave me a bear hug that almost squeezed my ribs in, saluted Lord Selkirk, and said, "The settlers from Jack River are just coming up the Red. They'll be here in a few minutes!"

"Mother, Father . . ." I blurted.

"They're fine. Just fine." He stopped and I'm sure I saw a broad wink flash between him and Lord Selkirk. "And that girl, Annette! She's a beauty! I don't wonder you were so anxious to go north with me . . ."

I didn't wait to hear any more. My feet were pounding over the earth towards the river below Fort Douglas, where a cheering, yelling crowd watched a flotilla of big York boats as they majestically swung around a curve in the river below the Fort.



Chapter Twenty-Three

HOME ON THE RED

KAT WAS right behind me. We raced down to the very edge of the water, and my eyes swept over the oncoming boats, seeking the familiar faces I had not seen for so long. Wallie, now recovered, was there ahead of me. Suddenly a tall figure rose in the bow of one of the craft well down the line, and I heard Father shouting, "Ronnie! Wallie!" at the top of his voice. The boat nosed into the mud. We ran to the spot, and Father's big arms engulfed us, as we were surrounded by a frantically happy mob which poured from the York boats and onto the bank, like a suddenly released flood.

Father was pounding me on the back, while the Frasers and Colbys scrambled out. Father helped Mother to shore, and while she wept over Wallie and me, someone else was watching me shyly—a tall,

smiling girl whose raven hair shone in the late sun, and whose parted lips were the colour of a cardinal's wing. She only said, "Ronnie!" and her arms clung to me unabashed, while I held her close and thanked God that she and my family had all returned to me safely.

Miles Macdonell arranged for two trusted de Meurons to act as Lord Selkirk's guard that night, so I could spend the evening with my family and friends. It was glorious, sitting around the fireplace in our own cabin. Mother had dusted and cleaned things up a bit, and Kat's old father, Katchebewan, sat with us, squatted cross-legged in the corner, silent, happy.

I related the story of how Kat and I had survived the dangers of the year. Wallie told of his imprisonment and release. Then, too, the endless, dreary days at Jack River were recounted by my father.

Kat and I took up our duty at Lord Selkirk's door the next-morning. I was more uneasy than ever, now that the Settlement was crowded, and there were a lot of Indians around, too. I had seen Bois-Brûlés disguised as Indians before this, and they couldn't be spotted. I felt sure that the half-breed, Pierre, wouldn't try an open attack on the Earl, but there was nothing to prevent him from dressing as a Cree, an Ojibwa, or an Assinibóine and treacherously carrying out the task his Nor'West masters had assigned him.

Lord Selkirk had a busy time. I didn't realize what it had cost him in worry and risk to help us as he did, nor did I admit the power of the Nor'Westers in Upper and Lower Canada until one day in July a constable

arrived at Fort Douglas with a duly sworn warrant for the Earl's arrest for his actions at Fort William.

If some of the judges at Sandwich, York, and Montreal had been through what I had experienced, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't have been so ready to extend a helping hand to the Nor'Westers in their attempts to frustrate Lord Selkirk in his work.

When that constable stamped down the hall and waved his warrant in front of my face, as I stood outside His Lordship's office, I felt like pushing my bayonet into his fat stomach and running him out of the place. I didn't let him in right off, and he fumed and glared while I asked the Earl's permission to allow the man to enter the room.

With all the excitement around me, and the scurry and bustle of the settlers' return, my anxiety about Lord Selkirk increased. Kat and I had a dozen Indian braves—the same ones who had beaten the brush when we took our walks—stationed around the Governor's House where Lord Selkirk stayed, and little went on that they didn't see. There was no sign, not a single hint of the whereabouts of Pierre, the assassin.

Meanwhile, I watched and worried, worried and watched. A couple of days after the warrant had been served on His Lordship, he called me inside his office. Kat, who was at the end of the hall, took my place at the door.

Selkirk was behind the big desk at the far side of the room. He looked pale and wan, and the whiteness of his hands showed up in startling relief against the dark

stain of the wooden desk top. He looked at me without speaking for a minute, and then his words came slowly.

"Ronnie, I am afraid I will have to leave the Settlement sooner than I expected. I just heard that the Nor'Westers have posted bailiffs and constables all along the Winnipeg River route back east. Aye, and more, too, for I hear that the Indians have been approached again and bribed to attempt my life."

"The rascals . . ." I started. He waved me quiet.

"I shall go back to Upper Canada and see it through," he went on wearily. "Otherwise the Nor'Westers will take it out on you folks here, and I do not want that to happen. But I will travel south over American territory, and avoid the traps which apparently have been laid by my enemies."

I nodded, a lump in my throat. He looked so tired, so worn out. His voice went on. "I want to tell my friends what I have arranged for them. We shall gather them together the day after tomorrow and I will talk to them."

Sudden alarm filled my mind at the picture of my friend, the Earl, in the midst of a crowd of people among whom were sure to be Indians, Métis, and free-traders alike, and where enemies as well as friends would surely mingle.

"That half-breed, sir. We still haven't found him . . ."

He nodded quickly. "You and your friends have done very well, Ronnie. I still do not wish to go through my day of dedication guarded like a despotic king. I prefer to leave it in your hands. But I would ask you

to keep a sharp lookout, for I'm sure everyone in the neighbourhood will be on hand."

I gulped. "I'd like to get help from some folks I can trust, my lord," I assured him.

That night there were visitors at our cabin south of Fort Douglas. They came at my request. First, my old friend Miles Macdonell arrived, and Charles, the voyageur. They trooped into the house, wondering what I had to tell them. Kat was already there, and so was Father, Wallie, Robert Fraser, Mr. Colby, and . . . Annette! I had a special reason for asking her.

It was a grand feeling to be among the folks who had shared so much danger with me, and the yarns of our experiences flew back and forth until the last of them came in.

I told them briefly about Dwyer's warning. They looked at one another with grave eyes while I talked. They all knew about the ceremony which was to take place in another day. Finally I said, "Lord Selkirk is going back east a few days after the dedication. That afternoon in the open and among the crowds will give Pierre his last chance to carry out his threat. Kat and I haven't told anyone about this affair, although we've known it ever since Dwyer died."

"If we'd informed the soldiers," I went on, "the news that we were expecting trouble surely would have reached Pierre's ears, and that would have made him doubly cunning. As it stands, the only ones who know besides Selkirk, are in this room. The Earl wasn't being dramatic when he agreed to that plan. It seemed

common sense to us. But he is a very brave man, just the same."

"So that's why you and Kat stuck to him so closely," Wallie remarked.

I nodded. "There are enough of us here to do what I think should be done. Will you stay in a body around the Earl while he speaks? Arm yourselves with pistols, but carry them out of sight. Kat and I will mingle with the crowd and keep our eyes open. And Annette . . ."

I turned to the girl who listened with wide eyes, and went on, "It would be an easy matter for the suspected 'breed to bundle up in the clothes of an Indian woman, you know. Will you watch out for anything unusual among the squaws?"

She nodded. Robert Fraser broke in: "We don't even know if Pierre will show up, Ronnie. He may have met with some mishap after his escape. He may be miles away right now."

"But we don't *know*," added Father soberly, "and I think Ronnie has used his head in this business. If that Métis knew we were after him, he'd be all the harder to catch. I'm with you Ronald. I'll help."

They all agreed to assist.

The day of the ceremony dawned bright and clear. In the early afternoon, little knots of people began drifting towards Parsonage Creek, north of the Fort, near the oak trees on Frog Plain. Here, within an hour of dinner, had gathered a motley crowd, and I could feel my stomach tighten when across the plains from the Fort we saw a tall figure striding towards us.

Lord Selkirk was bareheaded. He walked through the crowds, nodding pleasantly as he went. Father and Macdonell were at his heels. Charles, Robert Fraser, and Mr. Colby were at his side. They weren't looking at the Earl, but their eyes swung to survey all those near, as the little group made its way to a grassy knoll. My eyes followed them. There was Wallie, his back to the Earl, peering right and left. I could see Annette, over near the squaws, her lips a tight line and her eyes glued to the milling crowd of native women.

Lord Selkirk held up his hand. He was surrounded now with his people. They crowded in a semicircle around him, pushing close as his quiet voice drifted out over their heads.

He spoke of the hardships they had suffered, and he praised their fortitude. In simple words he told them of his ambition—his desire to establish his countrymen in this great, new land of Assiniboia. His life was dedicated to the task, he assured them, and at last it seemed as if his dream was coming true.

He went on, urging them to build roads, bridges, flour mills, and granaries, and as he talked my friends there to guard him faced, not the Earl, but the people who crowded around him.

I began to breathe more easily. There was little movement in the crowd, beyond a scurrying youngster, or the shifting of feet. Suddenly my throat tightened. From a group of Assiniboine Indians who had gathered at the far edge of the cluster of people, I saw a figure slowly, unobtrusively detach itself, and sidle almost

imperceptibly around the *outside* of the listening settlers and natives.

Inch by inch the man made his seemingly innocent way towards the knoll where Selkirk stood. I was on the other side, opposite the fellow, a good deal farther away from the Earl than he was. Kat was over there near the man, and I caught sight of him now, standing among the colonists. His head turned slowly as the figure shuffled back of him, and then he, too, melted into the crowd, following the native closely.

I started towards Lord Selkirk, walking as quickly as I could through the spell-bound settlers who were gazing at their benefactor with rapt attention. Lord Selkirk's voice had risen—

“ . . . and the parish shall be called Kildonan . . . ”

Now I was scurrying frantically around the outside of the thick circle of people. I still didn't know if the native was only a casual, wandering Indian, desirous of getting closer to Lord Selkirk, or if he might have a pistol or knife concealed under his blanket.

“ . . . and this land on which we stand shall be dedicated to your church . . . ”

I came up directly back of the Earl. Wallie and Charles shot anxious glances at me. I held my finger to my lips in a gesture of silence. The Indian was easing his way towards me.

Lord Selkirk's voice rang out. *“ . . . and there, south of the creek, you shall erect your school, and here . . . ”*

The oncoming Indian's head was down on his chest, and his arms were folded under his blanket. Suddenly



*The deadly whiz of his knife mingled with
my words.*

he looked up and I saw his face. A livid grey scar marked him as Pierre, the Métis who had escaped from us into the bush that night a few weeks ago up on the Red River!

It is hard for me to forget the look of amazement on the half-breed's face, nor the swift, silent movement of Kat, who was at the man's back an instant after I had waved at him and pointed frantically, nodding for all I was worth. I saw the glint of my companion's knife as he pressed it hard against the Métis and whispered something to the man.

I stood still, my body shielding Lord Selkirk's back as he talked on, oblivious of the grim drama being enacted behind him.

" . . . This land will be good to you and yours, and you shall grow and prosper with it in peace . . . "

I strode towards the two, Kat and his prize, who both stood like statues. I whispered fiercely, "Get him away from here! Don't spoil this great day for our friend Selkirk! Come on back to the Fort!"

Kat grunted. "You make noise, talk, you dead," he said to the figure in front of him. The man's lips curled but he stayed quiet. I yanked the blanket away from his chest. His hand held a long knife which I took from him. As the three of us moved off across the plain towards Fort Douglas, the words of the Earl grew fainter and fainter in my ears.

" . . . Your roots shall strike deep in the soil and you will perpetuate yourselves, and the pipes of the Highlands will long be heard on the banks of the Red . . . "

The ceremony wasn't interrupted. I'm sure Wallie and Charles were the only ones besides Kat and I who noticed what had happened. We neared the Fort. I've never seen Kat's face quite as hard as it was that day. He kept his knife close to the half-breed's back.

I said, "Watch him, Kat. He may try to get away."

"Me like see him do that," Kat growled. "Me kill."

To this hour, I've never quite figured out whether Kat tripped on purpose just then, or not, but the next minute he stumbled and went down on one knee. That Métis would never have tried to run if he'd known Kat as well as I do, but the moment the pressure of the knife left his back, he bolted like a scared rabbit.

I hadn't taken two strides after him before Kat was on his feet. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my companion's arm over his head. His right shoulder sank. In spite of myself I yelled:

"Kat! Don't . . .!";

The deadly whizz of his knife mingled with my words. The Métis hadn't had time to take half a dozen steps. He stopped abruptly and stiffened. His head snapped back and his fingers clawed awkwardly at the spot on his jacket where only the handle of Kat's lethal weapon could be seen against the man's dirty, buckskin shirt. He suddenly fell in a heap and lay still.

Kat looked at me with hard eyes. I could hardly believe I'd seen him kill a man so deliberately, but he had, and he meant to do it, too.

"That pay for Semple," he said quietly. "Bois-Brûlé bad."



Chapter Twenty-Four

THE SILVER CHIEF

A FEW days after the ceremony, Lord Selkirk gathered a body of Cree and Saulteaux Indian chiefs inside Fort Douglas, and there signed a treaty with them to secure for us a two-mile strip of land on both sides of the Red, and extending for a distance of six miles up and down the stream. For this he arranged to pay each Indian nation involved one hundred pounds of tobacco annually. He certainly left nothing undone to make sure of our colonists' right to the land.

I learned since that that was the first treaty ever to be signed between a subject of Great Britain and the tribes of Rupert's Land. I remember the date well—it was July 18, 1817.

I wondered how the Earl could sign treaties with the natives when the courts of both Upper and Lower

Canada were so hostile to him, but Miles Macdonell answered that for me when I questioned him about it.

"His Lordship is well within his rights, Ronnie," Macdonell told me. "We talked it over a couple of days ago. When the Earl bought Assiniboia from the Hudson's Bay Company, he agreed to settle it within a certain time—and he's done that in spite of everything that's happened. He assumed a lot of other obligations, too."

"What were those?" I asked.

"Well, there was the cost of transportation for the settlers for one thing. And he paid for food and supplies whenever we could get them. He was also given full power to settle title rights for the land with the Indians—and that he's just done, God bless him!"

"But what about the summons he got . . ." I started.

"The blazes with the courts in the Canadas," Macdonell spat angrily. "They haven't any more jurisdiction over Assiniboia than I have over the moon!"

The Indians really liked Lord Selkirk. Kat and I were in the compound when they trooped out of the Governor's House. They made a colourful sight, for they were all in their ceremonial dress. Bright headgear bobbed in the sunlight, and their beautiful costumes with intricate bead-work decorations gave the old Fort its first taste of pomp.

One of the Cree chieftains spoke to Kat. The boy grinned widely as the older man talked on rapidly in a native dialect which Kat seemed to understand quite well.

"What did he say?" I asked after the Indian had moved off.

"They call Selkirk 'Silver Chief' now. Him their friend, all time."

'Silver Chief'. That is the one title of Lord Selkirk's which sticks in my mind even today, and the one by which I most like to remember him. He came out on the steps, waving at his native friends who scurried away to their wigwams, delightedly clutching presents of tobacco, cloth, beads, and other wares which the Earl had given them.

"He's leaving the day after tomorrow, Kat," I said sadly. "I wish I could go with him, and add my testimony in his fight against the Nor'Westers."

Kat grunted. "You stay here. Time you settle down."

The night before the Earl departed southward, Kat and I got the surprise of our lives. We had just returned from hunting prairie chicken, which Lord Selkirk had personally asked us to go after that morning. We'd been lucky, and had a good bag, so after handing them over to the cook in the mess hall, we idly climbed up into the bastion of Fort Douglas.

We sat gloomily alongside the sentry, not saying a word. It was quiet. We looked out across the purpling prairies. They *were* peaceful now. A big field of grain with yellowing heads stretched away from the west walls of the Fort. The sun had sunk behind a dark bank of thick clouds, and long, orange shafts of light streaked the heavens. The faint sound of pipes reached our ears from the northern end of the Settlement.



Suddenly we heard feet clumping heavily on the rude rungs which led up to the lookout tower where we sat, and a soldier poked his head above the floor and said, "I've been looking all over for you, Macmillan. And you, too, Kat. Hurry up. His Lordship's been waiting to see you for the past half hour."

We clambered down and made our way to the Governor's House. The guard at Selkirk's door grinned at us and stepped aside. I rapped lightly. I heard the Earl's voice.

"Come in."

My eyes popped at what I saw. There were several people in the room—my people! Annette was standing beside Lord Selkirk's desk, with her father, Robert Fraser alongside. My father was chatting with the Earl as I came in. Mr. Colby stood near the window, and with him were Miles Macdonell, Wallie, and Charles, my voyageur friend.

It took me a second or two to realize that all the people who had taken part in my plan to protect Lord Selkirk at the dedication were together again, just as they had been a few nights before in our own cabin.

I stood there with my mouth open, so surprised that I didn't know what to say. Lord Selkirk greeted us.

"Ronnie! Kat! I must confess to a plot. I wanted this little gathering to be a surprise to you. That's why I sent you away hunting—so these folks could get here without your knowing it."

There was a twinkle in his eyes as he went on: "There are a few more duties I want to carry out before I leave

the colony in the morning. But first I want to tell all of you how grateful I am for your watchfulness on the prairie, when I was honoured to talk to my settlers a few days ago."

He stopped, and his glance met each of ours in turn. "You prevented an—an interruption, let us say, which probably would have ruined the one day in my life which stands out as the best I have ever known. I did not even learn of the incident until after I had returned to the Fort, and then my good friend Miles Macdonell here, told me all about it—and about the meeting in your house, Ronnie."

"I shall never forget what you have done for me," he continued earnestly. He glanced around once more, then straightened.

"Now!" he said briskly, as he reached for a sheaf of official looking papers which lay on his desk. "A few days ago our Indian friends signed a treaty which gave us this land on which the Fort stands—and a lot more as well. All of you have taken great risks one way or another for the sake of the colony. Ronnie and Kat, here, have put in over three dangerous years, more in my service than in any other way. Ronnie was the first Red River Settler I met—down on the Kaministiquia." He smiled at me and added, "I'll have more to say about you later."

He faced Miles Macdonell and Charles Stuart, the voyageur. "You two are going down to the Canadas with me, I believe, but you are coming back to the colony, so you tell me. When you do, this indenture

will give you the right to a good lot, facing the Red. The land is yours for all time—to work, to administer, and to enjoy.”

He passed a paper to each. They stood there dumb-founded. The Earl hurried on. “And here, Wallace Macmillan, is the deed to a plot for you. May you long prosper among your people.”

He swung to my father, Mr. Colby, and Mr. Fraser. “And to you folks I convey to you the rights for your land, so that no man can ever contest your privilege to own and cultivate it.”

He smiled at Kat. Instinctively the Indian boy drew himself erect.

“And to you, Kat, I know there is no point in giving land, for you are a son of the forest, and fields would only act as a fetter on your spirit.”

“To you, a new musket each year, with all the powder and shot you need, a red blanket every fall, the best knife in the storehouse whenever you want one, and a lifetime post as a Hudson’s Bay trapper and guide with Fort Douglas your headquarters.”

Kat smiled with a broader smile than I had ever seen on his face.

“Me glad, Silver Chief,” he said happily.

“And to your father, Katchebewan,” continued the Earl, “will you convey my gift—each year he is to come to the storehouse at Fort Douglas and collect a hundred pounds of tobacco for his tribe, all the powder and shot he may need, and also, a new musket. I am not unmindful of how his braves scurried ahead of us as you,

Ronnie, and I walked the prairies the first few days I was here."

Lord Selkirk still had one piece of paper in his hand. When he spoke to me, his eyes were twinkling.

"And as far as you are concerned, Ronnie, my young buckskin colonist, if I am not mistaken you will soon be needing a place of your own."

His head slowly turned towards Annette. I could see her blush, even in the lamplight. Everybody else was grinning broadly. The Earl went on to me:

"You came to Assiniboia with your people to help work the land. You have had little opportunity of doing it. Instead, you have travelled the fur-trade routes, fought for the colony, risked all sorts of dangers among the Nor'Westers and have acted like—well, like a man! And this Settlement needs men—like you."

I gulped in embarrassment as he finished, "Below your father's place is a particularly choice piece of ground. It faces the river, and the land is rich and fertile. Here is the deed to it."

I took the paper mechanically and mumbled, "Thank you, my Lord, but . . ."

He waved me quiet and turned to the lovely girl beside him. I thought I'd go through the floor at his next words.

"And for you, my dear, I have a special gift. On Ronnie's land is being erected a snug cabin. It will be complete within the month, and in it you will find furniture and utensils, a complete stock of provisions, and tools."

Annette gasped and her eyes met mine. The Earl added mischievously, "There is only one stipulation which goes along with its ownership by you. It must be occupied before the snow flies!"

Annette had moved slowly across the room, and stood beside me now, her hand holding mine and her eyes shining like stars. Lord Selkirk finished softly, "And I think it will!"

I could go on for many more pages and tell you of the next year, 1818, when clouds of locusts darkened the sky, and our crops and vegetables perished in a single night.

I could relate how news about Lord Selkirk continued to filter back to the colony long after he had gone, and how we worried about the bad time he was having in the courts of York and Sandwich in Upper Canada, where a political faction called the Family Compact in league with the Nor'Westers mulcted him of thousands of pounds—and sent him back across the Atlantic a broken and discouraged man.

I might recount my journey to the Mississippi in 1819, when the grasshopper plague struck again, and I was sent south to bring seed grain to the colony on flat-bottomed boats.

I set aside this story in late September, of the year 1820.

Annette and I were gathering in a grand crop of potatoes, and banking the vegetables in a winter root house where their own warmth would protect them

against the long months of cold ahead. It was a glorious fall evening, tinged with a hint of frost.

We'd left Bessie, our little daughter, over at Father's place while we worked, and I could see him hoisting our wee bairn gaily in his arms. I smiled at Annette, my wife, and she smiled back happily.

My gaze wandered northward, over the Settlement. Scores of new cabins dotted the prairies, the smoke from their chimneys staining the clear air. I could see the Fort, the new grist mill, the big granary, and the distant church—just as the Earl had predicted.

Suddenly a familiar yell reached my ears. My eyes whipped towards the Red River. A small canoe was approaching swiftly. It met the bank. A lithe figure clambered out, and hurried towards us. It was Kat. He was brandishing a string of plump fish on a forked stick.

"Me bring fish your squaw," he greeted me. "White fish good this year. Big."

He peered around at the potatoes which lay in golden heaps on the ground.

"You settled good now, Ron-ee. Silver Chief, him like that much." He looked across the river. The clearings had pushed the bush far back from the bank. I knew what he was thinking.

"Me like bush," he started gravely. "You like field." In a sober, anxious voice he went on, "You, me—we go hunt this fall—soon now? Get good venison. Yum!"

He rubbed his stomach vigorously while Annette laughed with me at his antics.

He looked just as he used to look, years ago, when I first met him—a little taller and heavier; perhaps, but still with the same grin and the same child-like humour he's always displayed. Kat hadn't gone back to the nomadic ways of his people entirely. He'd taken to the work which the Earl had given him, and was now one of the most trusted of all the natives who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company.

"Of course we'll go hunting, Kat," I answered him. "We haven't missed a fall in the last three years, have we?"

Kat frowned. "No. But me 'fraid some day you no like bush so good. You big colonist now."

"Yes—a buckskin colonist, Kat," I agreed.